

UNMASK THE ILLUSION, RECLAIM THE TRUTH.



MY REALITY

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****Chapter 1: HaPPy, hAppY WoRLd****



Allison stepped out of her sleek suburban home, a bright smile on her face as she made her way to the mailbox. The world around her was idyllic—a flawless sky stretched above, painted in the kind of vibrant blue that seemed too perfect to be real. The sun glowed warmly, bathing the meticulously trimmed lawns and flower-lined streets in a golden hue. Her heart swelled with satisfaction as she glanced at the day ahead. Another triumphant step forward in her career awaited her at Axion Multimedia Solutions, the company she had helped rise to record-breaking success.

Just last week, she had secured yet another lucrative contract, dazzling the client with promises of groundbreaking results delivered in impossibly short timeframes. It was her specialty—her gift. Allison knew she was indispensable to the company, the keystone of its recent explosive growth. No one else had her talent for reeling in clients and locking down deals. She was a star, and she reveled in the knowledge that her brilliance illuminated everything around her.

Deadlines? Pressure? These were minor inconveniences for others to handle. The production department always met her ambitious expectations, and what stood out most was their relentless positivity. When she stopped by their offices, she was greeted with radiant smiles, the kind that seemed to overflow with gratitude and devotion. Even when their efforts required working late into the night or sacrificing their weekends, their joy never seemed to waver.



"They understand," she often thought to herself. "We're a family. Sacrifices are part of the job, and they take pride in what they do for me—for the company."

In fact, their happiness had seemed to grow over the past year, just as her streak of success had. New contracts came in weekly, and the production department responded with unparalleled dedication. Faces came and went in the department—it was hard for her to keep track of names or why people seemed to leave so suddenly. But what did it matter when the replacements were just as cheerful? She could always count on the same glowing smiles and unwavering enthusiasm, a loyalty that bordered on reverence.

As she reached the mailbox, her gaze shifted to a man walking in the distance toward her. He was one of her neighbours in that beautiful neighbourhood. What was his name? Was it Sebastian? Maybe Stefan?... no, it was Steve—that was his name. She recalled, after a brief moment of thought, that he worked in the production department. She rarely interacted with those from that side of the company; they seemed like a blur of interchangeable faces, cogs in the well-oiled machine of her success.

Still, she felt a flicker of appreciation for his cheerful demeanor. Like the others, he wore that familiar smile. The one that radiated happiness and contentment. The one that reassured her everything was fine. But why, she wondered absently, was there such constant turnover in production? It didn't make sense when everyone seemed so happy.



The thought was fleeting, lost as she returned her focus to the bright, beautiful day. After all, everything was perfect—wasn't it?

Steve had joined the company a couple of years ago, though Allison only vaguely remembered the details. Something about a family—yes, a wife and children. How many? Her thoughts flickered to the interview, when his wife had been visibly pregnant. Their second child, wasn't it? That would mean Steve had two kids now, one of them barely a year old. Allison smiled to herself. Babies were such a joy, weren't they?

She often thought about having children someday, but her life was too full, too vibrant, for anything that required slowing down. Finding a partner who shared her boundless drive and her passion for her decisions had proven... complicated. It puzzled her, really. Every partner she'd ever had seemed to adore her, their faces radiating warmth and understanding, even when she made tough choices. Like the times she had to prioritize entertaining clients or nurturing new opportunities over spending time together. They always appeared to understand—right up until they didn't. One by one, they drifted away, leaving her with nothing but a quiet conviction that the right one would come along eventually.

"I just need someone who truly gets it," she thought. "Someone who sees the bigger picture, who knows what it means to sacrifice for greatness."



Steve was walking toward her now, his expression beaming with joy—perhaps the happiest smile Allison had ever seen. He held a single red rose in his hand, its vibrant petals practically glowing against the backdrop of the pristine morning. How thoughtful of him, she mused. A gesture of gratitude, no doubt, for the extraordinary work she'd been doing.

She paused to admire the rose as he approached. It seemed fitting, almost symbolic. After all, since Steve had joined the company, her streak of success had skyrocketed. Contract after contract flowed through her hands, a torrent of deals that kept the production department in constant motion.

Steve was always there, working tirelessly alongside the others. Nights, weekends, holidays—it didn't matter. He was a fixture, a constant presence, buzzing like a busy bee from one task to the next. And always with that same expression: joy. Unwavering, unshakable joy.

Today, however, his smile was different. Brighter. Fuller. As though every ounce of happiness in the world had been distilled into his face. For a moment, Allison felt a pang of pride. It was employees like Steve who made her accomplishments possible, who believed in the vision she brought to the company.



And yet, as he drew closer, a faint unease began to creep into her mind—like the tickle of a shadow in the corner of her vision. Something about his approach, about the intensity of his smile, felt... off. She quickly dismissed the thought. Steve was a team player, after all. A happy bee in her bustling hive. What could possibly be wrong?

Allison stood frozen as Steve closed the final gap between them. Now face to face, he was close—too close. She could see the intensity in his eyes, a fervor she hadn't noticed before. His smile stretched impossibly wide, almost trembling with excitement. He held out the red rose, the vibrant petals practically glowing against the morning sun.

How thoughtful, Allison mused. Such a small yet powerful gesture of appreciation for all the work she had done. But something about the way he presented it felt strange, even awkward. As if he were unsure of how to hand it to her. Then, in one swift motion, he pulled the rose back, almost teasingly, before thrusting it forward—straight into her stomach.

A sharp, searing pain radiated through her body, like the savage bite of a wild animal. "Ouch," she muttered, confused. That wasn't right. Roses weren't supposed to bite. She looked down, expecting to see petals brushing against her blouse. Instead, crimson streaks bloomed across the fabric, stark and jarring against her pristine outfit.



More red roses appeared, unfurling one after another from her stomach, their petals glistening and wet. Allison blinked, trying to make sense of it, but the pain muddled her thoughts. She barely registered Steve's hand pulling back and then surging forward again, delivering another rose. And then another. And another.

Each strike sent another bloom bursting forth, a surreal and horrifying cascade of flowers erupting from her abdomen. The vivid red clashed with the warmth of the day, creating a grotesque beauty that almost distracted her from the agony searing through her core. The world spun, her vision blurring, but she could still see it—the growing field of roses spreading out before her.

Steve didn't stop. His movements were mechanical, relentless, as he continued his offering. Over and over, the rose was presented to her with an almost reverent precision. Allison's knees buckled, and she collapsed into the sea of roses, the soft petals cushioning her fall. The world around her felt hazy, dreamlike. She was vaguely aware of the warmth of the sun on her face, the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze.

From the corner of her eye, she saw her neighbor Tom, diligently mowing his lawn. Summoning the last ounce of strength in her fading body, Allison raised a trembling hand and waved. Her arm fell limp as the pain began to dissolve, replaced by an odd sense of peace.



Tom waved back cheerfully, his face alight with the same radiant smile that everyone seemed to wear. He glanced at the scene unfolding across the street, where Allison lay amidst the lush, blooming roses. Steve knelt beside her, still offering his rose with a devotion that bordered on worship.

"How kind," Tom thought, pausing to take it all in. "Such good and generous people. What a beautiful world we live in."

And as Allison's vision dimmed, she clung to that thought—the beauty of it all. Her last breath escaped her lips in a sigh as she surrendered herself to the endless sea of red roses.

Chapter 2: OnE mAn's vISioN



By 2030, augmented reality had finally broken free from the fringes of obscurity and stumbled into the dazzling glow of mainstream acceptance. For decades, AR devices had been clunky, laughably oversized monstrosities—cumbersome headsets or clunky glasses that only the most devoted tech enthusiasts dared to wear. To everyone else, they were an embarrassing relic of science fiction, awkward contraptions best left in the hands of “those nerds.”

But those same enthusiasts, tirelessly tinkering and dreaming in their garages and basements, had laid the foundation for what would soon become a cultural revolution. Over the course of twenty years, their obsession with improving AR technology had culminated in a marvel that no one could ignore: sleek, stylish glasses that looked indistinguishable from the ordinary kind. These weren't just a product of technological advancement—they were a triumph of vision and design.

The new generation of AR glasses delivered an experience so seamless and immersive that it felt like magic. The image quality surpassed even the wildest dreams of futurists from the 2010s, rendering augmented overlays in breathtaking clarity. Reaction times were instantaneous, and controls intuitive, polished to perfection over two decades of iteration. For the first time, the technology felt natural, even for those who wouldn't normally touch a gadget more complex than a television remote.



No longer the domain of tech enthusiasts, AR glasses became a universal tool, embraced by every demographic. Whether you were a child enthralled by games brought to life in your living room, a professional navigating virtual workflows, or a retiree connecting with distant family through lifelike projections, the glasses promised something for everyone. Entertainment, work, relationships, education—every aspect of life began to adapt to the possibilities of this new platform. The cultural shift was seismic, akin to the introduction of the smartphone twenty years earlier.

But such a meteoric rise was far from inevitable. To reach this point, something extraordinary had to happen. Not just the steady march of technological progress or the natural evolution of consumer tastes—no, this was something far rarer.

It was all because of one man.

Over the past sixty years, society had been on a slow, relentless descent. Once a beacon of infrastructure and public services, the country that had prided itself on being a global standard for innovation and quality of life was now crumbling under the weight of corporate greed. Industry after industry fell into the hands of monopolies, each one less concerned with serving the people and more focused on squeezing every last cent from them.



Telecommunications was no exception. The internet, once heralded as the great equalizer and a catalyst for progress, had become a parody of its former self. Millions of people found themselves stuck with services so abysmal they made the early days of ADSL seem like a golden era. Connectivity was unreliable, speeds were pitiful, and prices were exorbitant. With no competition to challenge the monopolies, the abuse was systematic, inescapable, and unchecked.

This stagnation created an invisible ceiling for progress. The grand promises of technological revolutions—smart cities, AI-driven automation, and virtual worlds—remained tantalizingly out of reach for one simple reason: they required something society no longer had. A truly interconnected world demanded ubiquitous, high-speed broadband. Yet the reality was a decaying infrastructure growing worse by the day, a far cry from the visions of a seamless, digital utopia.

But where most saw a dead end, one man saw an opportunity.

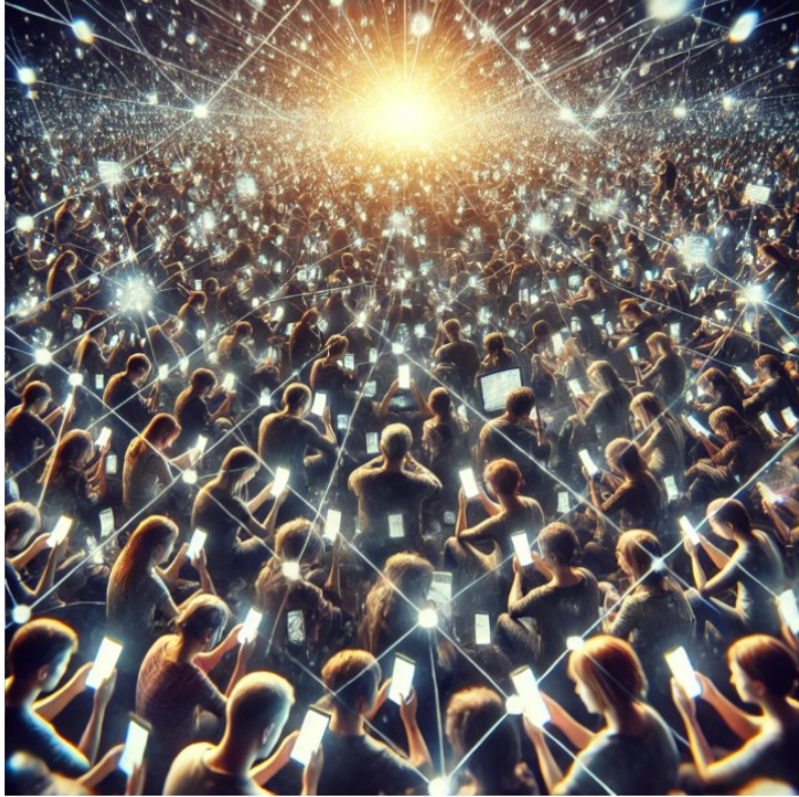
He was no philanthropist, no benevolent genius seeking to uplift humanity. In fact, history would remember him as one of the most ruthless, self-serving figures to ever walk the earth. But his cunning was undeniable. He understood the game better than anyone else and was willing to play it at a level few could comprehend.



For the first time in the cutthroat world of corporate power, a project emerged that appeared to be for the “general good”. This man proposed a radical idea: universal, free broadband internet. Not just in his country, but across the globe.

But let there be no illusions—this wasn’t born of altruism. His motives were as cold and calculating as they came. He wasn’t trying to help humanity; he was trying to exploit it. His move echoed the strategy of Henry Ford, the industrialist who, a century earlier, had introduced the concept of a five-day workweek. Ford hadn’t done it out of kindness—he did it because it allowed his workers to earn and spend more, ideally on his cars. Ford understood that to milk the maximum profit from the masses, sometimes you had to let them keep just enough to make the system work.

This man—let’s call him a visionary, if only for his vision of profit—followed the same logic. If he was to extract every possible ounce of value from humanity, he first had to create the conditions for his schemes to thrive. Free, high-speed broadband wasn’t a gift to the world; it was bait in a trap. And like Ford before him, he understood that sometimes, to get what you want, you have to give the people just enough to keep them coming back for more.



Had this plan been proposed by anyone else, it would have been dismissed as madness, or worse, the person would have been metaphorically burned at the stake as a heretic—had such measures still been legal. But our man, the architect of this audacious vision, knew exactly how to manipulate the game. His genius wasn't just in dreaming big; it was in knowing how to sell those dreams to the right people.

He didn't pitch the plan as a charitable act or even a technological marvel. Instead, he made a far more compelling argument to the power-hungry elites in government. He painted a vision of a future where they held unprecedented control over the masses, achieved through a seamless fusion of technology and psychological manipulation. Decades of perfecting digital addiction loops had already laid the groundwork; this project would merely elevate it to levels never before seen in human history.

With universal broadband as the foundation, they could engineer a society so submissive, so unflinchingly loyal, that even the wildest dreams of history's most despotic rulers would pale in comparison. Every individual, every transaction, every thought, would exist within their reach. No coin would escape their grasp, no corner of the Earth would lie beyond their influence. The power to sculpt reality itself was within their hands, and they need only take it.



The pitch landed with thunderous impact. The dictator wannabes, who already ruled with iron fists in their respective nations, were electrified by the prospect. The unchecked power to create a populace that would not only obey their every whim but would thank them for the privilege? It was intoxicating. Fantasies of excess and domination danced before their eyes as they imagined a world where they could drain their citizens of everything, including their very autonomy, without resistance. It took just one meeting to seal the deal. Their signatures inked the plan into reality with an almost feverish excitement.

At the time, the world's populations were still divided. On one side were the unconditional followers, those fervent supporters of the dictators who had already pledged their loyalty without question. On the other side were the moderates, people who still clung to the fragile hope that the system could work, that reason and fairness might still prevail.

The unconditional followers were easy prey. Despite the glaring contradictions between the plan and some of their most deeply rooted cultural beliefs, it took little effort to bring them on board. The beauty of such devotion was its malleability—beliefs could be shaped, erased, or replaced as needed. If today's truth was green, tomorrow's could be blue, black, or white, and they would follow without hesitation. By the end of the first wave, nearly all of them were already in line.



The moderates posed a greater challenge. They were suspicious—rightly so. They could see through the plan’s veneer of altruism, recognizing the danger of placing such an essential service under monopolistic control. Yet they found themselves trapped by their own rhetoric. Free, accessible broadband was something they had long promised the people, an ideal they had championed. To oppose it now would make them hypocrites in the eyes of their supporters. And so, reluctantly, they found themselves unable to stand in its way.

After four relentless years and an almost unimaginable expenditure, the project came to fruition. It was, by all accounts, the largest undertaking humanity had ever faced. A global network of satellites, bolstered by millions of communication towers, blanketed the planet. The dream of that man—the so-called 'gift' to mankind—was now a reality. A gift not unlike the one Henry Ford had bestowed upon his workers a century earlier: something ostensibly altruistic, but in truth, a calculated maneuver for control and profit.

But this gift carried a price—one that would reverberate across the world. Access to the network was strictly controlled. Only corporations approved by the governing body of this new infrastructure were allowed to deploy their services. This wasn't merely an enhancement of the Internet as it was known. It was an entirely separate creation—a “New Internet.” And unlike the chaotic, decentralized web of old, this one was fully corporate-controlled, designed to function as a closed ecosystem.

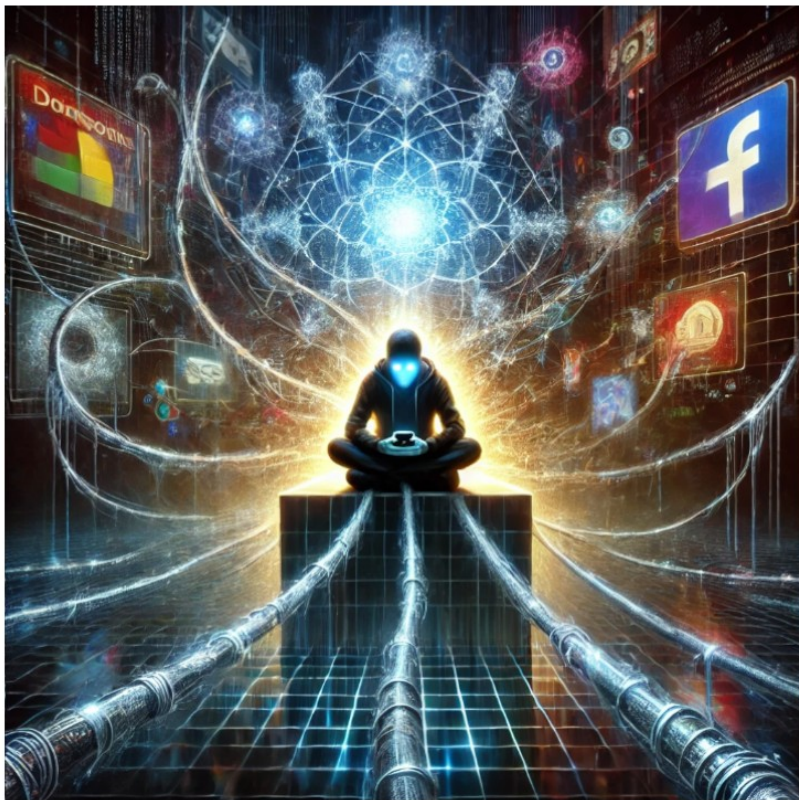


Curiously, the mainstream population adopted the New Internet with little to no resistance. The transition was seamless, even enthusiastic. The major platforms were all there: the biggest social networks, the trendiest influencers, the most popular media corporations, and the largest video game publishers. Everything people loved, everything they depended on, was already onboard. It wasn't just free; it was leagues ahead of the sluggish, overpriced service offered by the old Internet providers. Faster, more reliable, and infinitely more appealing, it was an easy sell.

The old Internet, meanwhile, decayed rapidly. Those who clung to it were left with rising costs and deteriorating quality, as executives of failing ISPs squeezed every last dollar from their sinking ships. In no time, the old web became a shadow of itself—a graveyard of forgotten sites and abandoned networks.

And so, the profit began to flow.

The New Internet's business model was designed for one thing: maximizing revenue. Only "approved" products were allowed on the platform, and every one of them adhered to a strict Free2Play model that had been perfected over decades. The addictive mechanics, honed to a science, transformed casual users into revenue streams. On the old Internet, these games had generated millions. But with billions now plugged into the New Internet, the results were staggering.



The term “whale”—once niche jargon for big spenders in digital games—now described a global phenomenon. With their reach expanded a hundredfold, the number of whales exploded, driving revenue to levels beyond even the wildest dreams of the corporations. The addiction loops, refined over twenty years, extracted every possible drop from their users.

The human cost was staggering, but the response was chillingly indifferent. Stories of whales losing everything—jobs, homes, families—were dismissed as the price of progress. Suicides became disturbingly common, yet they barely caused a ripple in the mainstream consciousness. To the masses, it was a matter of personal weakness. “If you’re a whale, it’s your own fault,” people would say. “Everyone else knows how to play responsibly.”

This normalization of exploitation mirrored the old stigmas around drug addiction, physical or digital. The games, to most, were harmless fun—a way to pass the time. Few stopped to consider the parallels: how the same tools of addiction that hooked whales were subtly manipulating everyone else. After all, if it didn’t hurt them, why should they care?

But beneath the surface of this utopia lay a simple, unspoken truth: the New Internet wasn’t about connectivity, freedom, or innovation. It was about control—control so total and insidious that no one even thought to question it.



With the foundational system firmly in place, it was time to think big. Not just big—really big.

The first major innovation to erupt within the “New Internet” was augmented reality (AR) glasses. With the network’s unparalleled latency and the massive leap forward in cloud-computing capabilities, AR technology finally had its moment. By shifting the heavy computational lifting to the cloud, the glasses themselves became sleek, lightweight, and accessible. All they truly required were high-quality cameras and precision projection lenses—two technologies that had seen remarkable advancements and extreme miniaturization over the past decade.

The AR glasses weren’t just a technological marvel; they were a gateway. A window into the user’s world—and, more importantly, a two-way mirror for those who controlled the infrastructure. The cameras embedded in the glasses captured everything users saw and heard, feeding an unrelenting stream of data back to the corporations. Privacy, once a fiercely debated issue, had long since eroded under the weight of convenience and apathy. The population, already conditioned by years of data sacrifices on social media and smart devices, barely batted an eye at the implications.



Within a few years, the adoption of AR glasses reached heights comparable to the smartphone boom of the early 21st century. They were everywhere. Only the most remote and isolated places on Earth were free of their ever-watching lenses. And as the cameras spread, so did the unchecked power of the corporations. Governments, too busy indulging in their slice of the profits, offered no resistance. Corrupt politicians, easily bought, ensured that laws protecting privacy were either gutted or never written in the first place. In this new world, the corporations had free rein, harvesting an unthinkable amount of data without oversight or accountability.

But for all the success of AR glasses, they were merely a checkpoint—a milestone on the road to something far greater. The real vision, the ultimate goal, was still taking shape.

That vision required another piece of the puzzle: artificial intelligence.

While AR had made significant strides, the advancements in AI were nothing short of revolutionary. Over the past decade, the pace of progress in AI had reached levels that bordered on the incomprehensible. The explosion of generative AI had captured public attention, but it was merely the tip of the iceberg. Behind the scenes, investment and breakthroughs were happening across all fields of AI. Image recognition, a technology that had been steadily evolving for over forty years, now operated at a level that surpassed human capability. Paired with generative models and advanced predictive algorithms, the potential for AI to reshape reality was finally within reach.



With cloud computing now a practical reality and AI capabilities soaring, it took only a few years to develop the software that would complete the plan. It wasn't just a tool; it was the realization of one man's dream for absolute control over the population—a system designed to guide, influence, and manipulate with surgical precision.

On May 25, 2032, version 1.0 of My Reality was released to the world.

Over the past twenty years, our man had observed a profound transformation in how the population interacted with the maturing Internet. He noticed patterns—ones that many overlooked or underestimated. The Internet, once celebrated as a tool for connecting humanity, had become something else entirely: a mechanism for division.

People gravitated toward like-minded groups, forming echo chambers that warped their perception of reality. These bubbles insulated them, amplifying their biases and shielding them from anything outside their chosen worldview. What began as a means of connection evolved into a system of isolation—one where individuals selectively curated their reality, filtering out everything they didn't want to see.



Our man saw the historical contrast clearly. Before the Internet, people were more exposed to a variety of sources. They consumed newspapers, books, and even cable TV, which—though flawed—had not yet become the radical, sensationalist machine it would later be. The world had been more tolerant then, more open to the exchange of ideas. Different viewpoints, while not always accepted, were at least encountered.

But by the late 2000s, social networks began their rise to dominance as a primary channel for information. These platforms brought with them a seismic shift in how people consumed and engaged with content. The companies behind them weren't interested in fostering understanding or community. Their goal was singular: profit. And they found the perfect fuel to achieve it—hate.

Hate was addictive. It was magnetic, drawing users back again and again to argue, rage, and vent against strangers thousands of miles away. The algorithms fanned the flames, prioritizing outrage because it kept users engaged longer. As this cycle repeated, society fragmented further into a sprawling web of disconnected bubbles. People became less informed, less tolerant, less willing to entertain new ideas. If information existed outside their bubble, it may as well not have existed at all.



This wasn't a random side effect of technological progress—it was a systemic transformation. The Internet was no longer a unifying force; it had become a fractured reality, where every individual lived in their own carefully constructed universe.

To our man, this fragmentation wasn't a tragedy. It was an opportunity.

He understood that a less informed, less tolerant population was far easier to manipulate. Ignorance wasn't just a byproduct of the system—it was the foundation of control. And as the bubbles grew more rigid, society itself became malleable.

While he contributed to this fragmentation by launching his own social network, he hardly needed to. The other platforms were already working tirelessly toward the same outcome. Their business models depended on it. The momentum was unstoppable, a runaway train that no one—not governments, not academics, not society at large—seemed willing or able to derail.

And our man smiled, watching the rails extend endlessly before him.

The software My Reality was built on a simple yet profound principle: society's growing desire to retreat into their bubbles. It was an application for AR glasses that allowed users to reshape the world around them, tailoring reality itself to their personal tastes and preferences.



No longer did you have to endure the sight of a crumbling, dirty street or the drab confines of your cheap, run-down apartment. With My Reality, you could replace it all. A dull city block could transform into a whimsical Disneyesque wonderland, the sleek futurism of Star Trek, or even the grotesque, thrilling biomechanical landscapes of Alien. The world outside became a canvas, rendered in vivid, fantastical detail by the system's immense computational power.

But the real magic of My Reality wasn't in reimagining lifeless objects—it was in reshaping living things. The application's true highlight lay in its ability to alter the people around you. Thanks to the incredible advancements in cloud computing and AI, your partner, neighbor, or coworker could be rendered exactly how you wanted them to appear. Was your partner's face too plain for your liking? Purchase a lookalike skin of your favorite movie star from the in-app store. Licensing agreements ensured that celebrities, eager for a slice of the revenue, enthusiastically promoted the platform.

And the transformation didn't stop at appearances. Voices, too, could be reimagined. With My Reality's computational power, the voices of those around you could be filtered and altered, even down to their tone and message. An insult could morph into a charming suggestion. If someone rudely commented on your unkempt appearance, the system could reframe it as, "It would be lovely if you could grace the world with your beautiful self after a refreshing aromatic shower."



The software was an instant phenomenon. People's long-held dreams of living in their fantasies became a tangible reality. With My Reality, they could finally escape every annoyance, every disagreement, every confrontation. Unpleasant images, unwelcome ideas, or people who didn't align with their worldview could simply vanish. The app's data-collection systems, fed by users who eagerly volunteered their personal information, allowed for ever-deeper customization. Users could filter out individuals who didn't share their political ideologies, ensuring they never had to interact with anyone outside their carefully curated bubble.

It was paradise—or so it seemed.

Yet our man wasn't fully satisfied. There was still a crack in his vision, a flaw in the system: people could take off their glasses. They could step away from the illusion and face the unfiltered world. That option, however fleeting, was unacceptable.

He continued to work, driven by his relentless ambition. The success of My Reality generated an insane cash flow, giving him the resources to design the next step in his plan—the ultimate evolution of his creation.

The solution was bold, revolutionary, and insidious: contact lenses. Unlike the glasses, these lenses would be surgically implanted, integrating seamlessly with the user's eyes. With My Reality embedded directly into their vision, the experience would be inescapable. The illusion would no longer be a choice. Reality itself would be overwritten, and there would be no way to turn it off.



Our man was close to achieving his ultimate goal. And this time, there would be no escape.

Curiously, there was almost no resistance to the latest advancement in technology. The population, already deeply addicted to their own custom realities, leapt at the opportunity to never see the unfiltered world again. The allure was irresistible, and the implications? Barely questioned.

For appearances, a small fail-safe was included—a button, embedded in the temples of the contact lenses, that users could press to 'switch off' the system. Of course, this came with a hefty fee, ensuring that only the wealthiest could even entertain the illusion of control. But the switch wasn't truly an 'off' button. Even in its deactivated state, a minimal level of augmented reality filtering remained active. The world became uglier, certainly, but not as ugly as it really was. True reality was something the system never allowed people to face fully.

Despite this restriction, the vast majority embraced the trade-off without hesitation. Why confront the bleakness of the real world when they could remain in a dream? Why endure discomfort when they could exist in curated perfection? For most, it wasn't a choice—it was salvation.



And so, humanity finally retreated fully into their bubbles, their personal pocket universes, disconnected from the ugly truths outside. They surrounded themselves with the comforting illusions of My Reality, safe from the discordant chaos of differing opinions, inconvenient facts, and harsh realities.

The success of the technology was so overwhelming that it transcended its origins as a consumer product. Governments around the world adopted it as a cornerstone of societal infrastructure. Participation in the My Reality system became mandatory, integrated into national identification processes. If you wanted to exist as a citizen—if you wanted access to services, employment, or even basic rights—you had to be part of the system. The justification was simple and airtight: it was for everyone's safety.

And that was it.

Our man had achieved his ultimate goal. A population blissfully unaware of their own misery, trapped in fantasies while living in squalor. They spent the little income they had on his services, pouring their lives into his pockets without hesitation.

He and his allies held everything—every ounce of wealth, every shred of power, every thread of control. No coin escaped their grasp, no thought remained outside their influence.



There was nothing left beyond their reach.

And it would remain that way.

Forever.



Chapter 3: Another man's vision

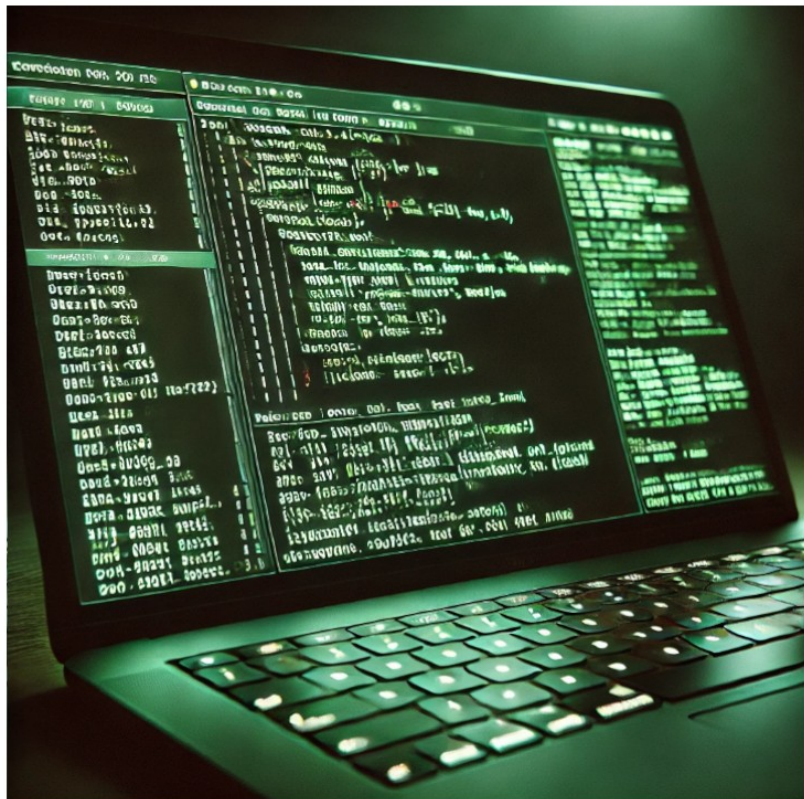
The test had been successful.

Luca allowed himself a shallow breath, the first since he had initiated the hack. For minutes that felt like hours, he had watched the system's data streams, waiting for even the faintest sign of detection. None came. The silence was deafening, but in it lay confirmation: his scripts had worked. A heavy weight lifted from his chest. After years of meticulous preparation, endless nights of coding, and thousands of simulations, he had finally taken the plunge. For the first time, he had tampered with the New Internet's most critical infrastructure. He had played with fire—and, so far, had avoided getting burned.

The stakes couldn't have been higher. Luca knew the risk of exposure, but there had been no other way to move forward. He had to test the system under real-world conditions. And as the minutes stretched into an hour, confidence began to replace the suffocating dread in his chest.

His hack had worked flawlessly.

Hours would pass before the system would finally recognize the dead body of Allison. The world around her saw no corpse, no blood, no sign of violence—only a lush field of vibrant red roses spreading across her front lawn, masking the horror beneath. Pedestrians strolled past without a second glance, immersed in their custom realities, their AR filters painting the scene in serene, picturesque beauty. Even the garbage man, who also doubled as the neighborhood landscaper, failed to notice anything unusual. Only when the system eventually processed his routine lawn care data would it detect something amiss.



Until then, Allison's death was hidden in plain sight.

Luca spent the rest of the day poring over logs and data, scrutinizing every report connected to Allison. Each parameter, every response from the central AI, had to be perfect. His scripts had performed as intended, masking her vital signs and rerouting them into a plausible narrative. The system registered Allison as bedridden with a common flu—just sick enough to avoid suspicion but not so ill as to require external intervention. The central AI, relying on automated protocols, notified her employer that she was unable to work. No alarms, no questions.

The real triumph, however, lay in the script that had allowed him to mask the danger alert. It was the cornerstone of his operation: an exploit he had discovered deep within the system's code. The exploit allowed him to intercept warning signals and reroute them through his own script, transforming critical alerts into benign, everyday occurrences. The dangerous situation at Allison's house had been rendered into something so mundane that even the system, with its near-omniscient reach, had dismissed it without hesitation.

The filtering worked seamlessly. Instead of registering a life-threatening event, the system interpreted the scene according to Allison's personal My Reality preferences. To her account, the world was as it should be—calm, orderly, and beautiful.



For Luca, it was a grim validation of his years of work. The system, built to monitor and control billions, could be deceived. And he was the one who had done it.

But as the hours passed and the data confirmed his success, a new weight began to settle on his shoulders. The test had been a necessary risk, but it was only the beginning. He knew the system better than anyone, and he knew its reach. There would be no room for mistakes.

This was only the first step.

Luca sat hunched over his desk, his eyes locked onto the faint green text glowing against the black background of his outdated computer screen. The tiny apartment he called home, nestled in the poorest part of the city, was damp and suffocatingly small. Thousands of miles away, in a world far removed from his own, Allison's life had ended—and Luca's work had just begun.

The computer before him was a relic, a cheap, discontinued model that belonged to a bygone era. Yet it was his most prized possession. It was among the last devices capable of bridging both the New Internet and the remnants of the old Internet, a distinction that gave Luca an edge in a world where most had moved entirely to the corporate-controlled system. The machine was stripped of anything unnecessary; it lacked even a visual operating system. Everything was text-based—lines of green text scrolling across the screen like whispers from a forgotten past.



His fingers moved quickly across the keyboard, typing commands that allowed him to monitor hundreds of systems in real time. Every line of code he executed was precise, intentional, and vital to ensuring his scripts performed as expected. He couldn't afford a single mistake.

Finding someone like Allison had been disturbingly easy. She hadn't even been his original target. Luca's scripts scanned the records of companies with high employee turnover, particularly small and medium-sized businesses where labor exploitation was rampant. His algorithms zeroed in on patterns: employees working unpaid overtime, supervisors demanding endless sacrifices to meet impossible deadlines, and the inevitable breaking points when the pressure became unbearable.

Steve had been one of many cases flagged by Luca's scripts. A man stretched to the brink by years of unrelenting stress and dehumanizing conditions. For each case, Luca's system identified the managers responsible for driving their employees to the edge. He crafted specialized scripts for each manager, waiting for the moment when their actions would push someone too far—when the breaking point would snap into violence.

The use of My Reality made this process all the more insidious. Managers, living in their augmented bubbles, rarely saw the real faces of their employees. They issued impossible orders and demanded unpaid labor with cheerful smiles, oblivious to the emotional toll they inflicted. The employees, in turn, had their pain masked by the AR filters, rendering their expressions serene or even joyful. The system ensured no one saw the strain, the fatigue, or the despair.



It wasn't just Allison and Steve. People cracked under the pressure constantly, pushed to their limits by a system designed to grind them down. The corporate AI caught most of them before they acted, neutralizing threats swiftly and quietly. These incidents never made it into the news. The world remained a “happy, happy place,” or so the façade insisted.

But Allison's death was different. Luca's scripts had disrupted the perfect machine. For once, the system hadn't intervened. For once, the consequences of relentless exploitation had played out without being sanitized or erased. And Luca wasn't finished.

His fingers paused for a moment as he scanned the output scrolling across his screen. His work was meticulous, each line of code a small rebellion against a world where misery was dressed in roses.

He wasn't just hacking the system. He was forcing it to see itself.

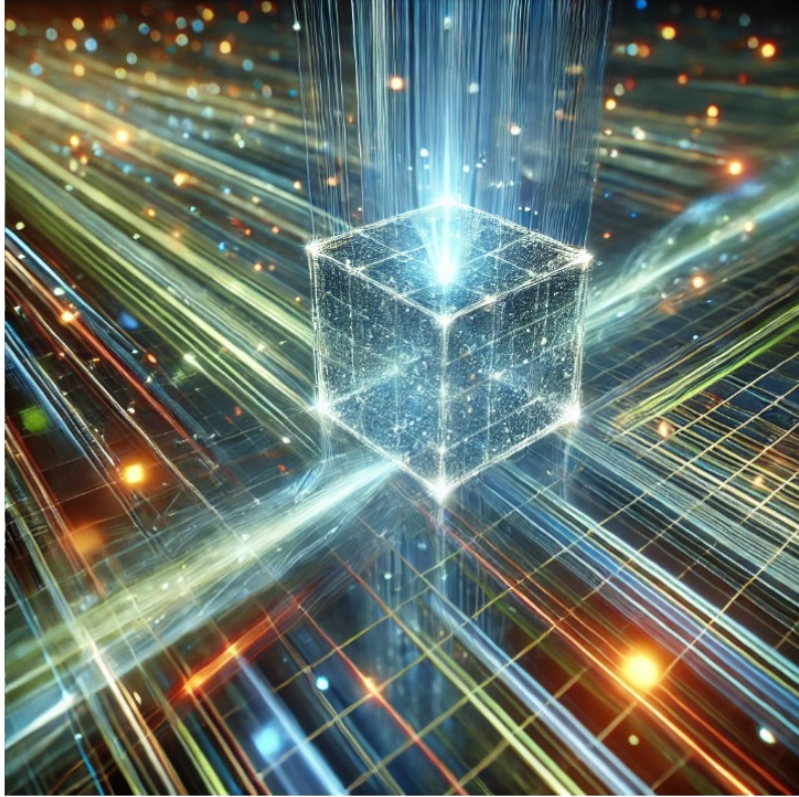
When the textual output informed Luca that the system had detected Allison's body, he knew it was time to cover his tracks. Methodically, he erased all traces of his scripts from the system. Before logging out, he executed a batch script—a carefully crafted piece of code that subtly altered the backend server scripts of the My Reality app. It was a minor adjustment, just enough to redirect any investigation into the incident.



The change would ensure that the complacent system administrators, lulled into apathy by years of unchecked control, would dismiss the anomaly as a minor system glitch. A ticket would be generated, shuffled into the endless backlog of routine maintenance tasks. Eventually, it would land in the hands of one of the corporation's mediocre programmers, someone barely competent enough to patch it. Luca knew they'd likely do a sloppy job, leaving his backdoor into the system—accessed through the old Internet—intact and undetected.

The old Internet was a ghost of the titan it had once been. At the dawn of the New Internet, corporations had pushed aggressively to eliminate it entirely, but even they had been forced to compromise. The transition of global software services required a period of coexistence between the two systems. Once the transition was complete, however, the old Internet faded into near obscurity. Its user base dwindled to a negligible fraction of the population, and the corporations, smug in their domination, abandoned any efforts to maintain or monitor it.

Publicly, they touted their “solidarity,” claiming that preserving the old Internet was a gesture of goodwill for the minority who resisted the New Internet. In truth, they saw no threat in its survival. The general population's technical knowledge had been so thoroughly eroded over the years that the corporations believed no one was capable of exploiting the relic. To them, the old Internet was an ancient forest—dark, twisted, and impenetrable—where no one could navigate far enough to find anything of value.



Its reduced bandwidth was another barrier. At best, it offered only a trickle of data—mere kilobytes per second—ensuring that even the most determined user faced a frustrating, painstaking journey. Yet corporations found one use for the decrepit system: a testing ground for experimental applications. Early betas of extreme software features were deployed there, products so unregulated and addictive that users sometimes lost their minds—or even their lives. Starvation deaths from obsessive engagement with these early applications weren't unheard of, though such stories were quickly buried under corporate PR campaigns.

Despite its obscurity, Luca understood something that the corporations never could: even in such degraded conditions, a single byte could carry enough information to change the world.

****Chapter 4: A CriME iN pArAdiSe****

"The crime has no mystery. The system failed to classify the danger as such," the first inspector reported to William Davis, head of criminal investigations, as he stepped onto the meticulously maintained lawn of the crime scene. "The technicians have already pinpointed the problem and are working on a fix. We've apprehended the suspect who committed the crime."

William nodded but remained silent, his sharp gaze sweeping over the scene. He wasn't one to accept explanations at face value, especially when it came to a system as ingrained in society as the My Reality network. The inspector handed him a tablet containing the 3D footage of the event. William reviewed it, the projection rendering the scene in lifelike clarity before him.

He saw Steve approaching Allison, his body radiating fury, every step punctuated by shouted insults and threats. The kitchen knife in his hand gleamed, its deadly intent clear. Allison, on the other hand, appeared serene, almost unnervingly so. Her face showed no fear, no recognition of the danger bearing down on her. Instead, she smiled, radiating an almost surreal happiness as Steve plunged the knife into her abdomen.

Even as her life ebbed away, Allison's expression remained unchanged. It was a face that belonged in a moment of celebration, not one of brutal violence.





William replayed the footage, shifting perspectives to examine the broader scene. A couple of dozen cars had driven past the crime, their occupants oblivious. Several pedestrians had walked by as well, yet none had reacted. The system, the omnipresent guardian of society, had failed to register anything out of the ordinary. The murder unfolded in plain sight, unnoticed and unchecked.

This wasn't just a glitch. The system wasn't perfect—no technology was—and occasional hiccups were expected, especially after major updates. But this? This was unprecedented. The system had never failed so catastrophically to classify such a clear and present danger.

The My Reality system, bolstered by the compulsory integration of AR contact lenses, was society's sentinel. By monitoring vital signs—heartbeat, sweat levels, breathing patterns—the system's AI had learned to predict criminal intent with remarkable accuracy. Tension spikes correlated with aggression, fear, or anxiety, creating early warning signals that allowed authorities to intervene before a crime occurred. Crimes of passion or impulse occasionally slipped through, but premeditated acts were rare, caught by the system long before they could be carried out.

Then there were the outliers—those who lived outside the system's reach. Underground dwellers, hidden in the abandoned subway networks, had severed themselves from society entirely. They avoided the lenses, the New Internet, and the unyielding surveillance that came with them. But they didn't surface during daylight, let alone commit bold crimes in public.



This murder didn't fit either profile. It was premeditated, calculated, and both Steve and Allison were firmly within the system's tracking parameters. Every indicator said this crime shouldn't have happened.

Officially, the case could be closed as a one-off anomaly—a technical glitch, nothing more. But as William stared at the footage again, unease gnawed at him. Something felt off, a small but persistent itch in the back of his mind. He'd spent decades honing his instincts, and they were telling him there was more to this than a simple error in the system's code.

He closed the tablet and glanced around the scene once more. The pristine lawn, the red roses blooming vividly across the AR-rendered front yard, were no more, now a pool of blood was perfectly visible in its place. This wasn't just a failure of technology. It was something else.

And William Davis wasn't the type to let it go

William entered the stark interrogation room, where Steve sat waiting. The fluorescent lights buzzed faintly, casting a sterile glow over the walls. Steve had declined the presence of a lawyer, a decision that struck William as unusual but not unheard of. The man had already confessed, fully owning up to his actions.



Taking a seat across from him, William studied Steve. His face was calm, almost serene. There was none of the tension, fear, or defiance that usually accompanied a suspect in his position. If anything, Steve radiated a peculiar kind of peace, as though committing the crime had somehow brought him closure.

William began, his tone measured but probing. "Mr. Davis, I've been informed that you refused legal counsel. I've reviewed your records, and they paint a picture of a model citizen—volunteering for social causes, active in your community. Are you absolutely sure you don't want to reconsider the presence of a lawyer?"

Steve offered a faint smile. "Please, call me Steve. And no, there's no need. I understand the gravity of what I've done, and I accept the consequences."

William nodded, leaning forward slightly. "Alright, Steve. In your statement, you mentioned deciding to commit the crime early that morning. You described being under significant stress. Can you tell me what caused that stress?"

Steve's expression didn't waver as he replied, his tone calm but tinged with something deeper—resignation, perhaps. "Of course. The day before, I lost my wife and two sons in a car accident. They were on their way to see me at work. I had to stay late again, and Cathy—my wife—thought it'd be nice if they could bring me dinner and spend a few minutes together. On the way, a drunk truck driver ran a red light and crashed into their car. They were killed instantly."



William paused, his professional detachment slipping for a moment. "I'm deeply sorry for your loss."

Steve exhaled, his shoulders sinking slightly. "Thank you... but it doesn't matter now. It's over."

William shifted his gaze to the file in front of him, scanning the details. "You worked as a computer programmer at an advertising agency. Was working late a common occurrence for you?"

Steve's jaw tightened slightly, his calm demeanor cracking just enough to show a flicker of tension. "Yes... it was."

William pressed gently, understanding the weight of Steve's response. "Was this overtime connected to Allison Harrison? We know you both worked for the same company."

Steve flinched at the mention of Allison's name, a subtle reaction that didn't escape William's notice. "Yes," Steve admitted, his voice quieter now. "She was one of the account managers responsible for bringing in clients."

Elaborating, he continued, his tone laced with restrained bitterness. "She set deadlines that were... impossible. Unrealistic, even. For over a year, our department worked non-stop—nights, weekends, holidays—just to meet her targets. And it wasn't just the workload. There was always the unspoken threat hanging over us: if we failed, we'd be fired. She made that perfectly clear."



William leaned back slightly, his tone probing yet calm. "Did you ever try speaking to her about the situation?"

Steve let out a long, heavy sigh, his gaze dropping to the table. "We tried. Multiple times. But there was no talking to her. She used My Reality to filter everything. Every request for dialogue, every plea for more reasonable working conditions—it all vanished into the app, rephrased or ignored completely. She didn't even see us, not really. To her, we were just... smiling faces and compliant voices. And the CEO? He was useless. He gave her free rein to do whatever she wanted, no matter the cost to the rest of us."

William observed Steve carefully, noting the bitterness in his tone and the exhaustion etched into his features. There was more here than just anger—there was despair. Despair that had clearly festered for a long time, until it boiled over into something catastrophic.

For a moment, the room fell silent, the faint hum of the lights the only sound. William knew this case was far from as straightforward as it seemed. The system's failure, Steve's calm acceptance, the layers of systemic neglect—it all pointed to something larger, something that didn't sit right.



William nodded thoughtfully, his tone measured. "I understand..." He glanced at the report again, his eyes scanning for additional details. "Steve, the records indicate you're a programmer. Can you tell me what your area of expertise is?"

Steve cleared his throat, his voice steady despite the weight in the room. "I'm a specialist in multimedia and 3D software applications."

William tilted his head slightly, his gaze sharpening. "And if we investigate further, are we going to find anything... unusual? Perhaps something about hacking skills?"

Steve's reaction was immediate and defensive, his voice rising slightly. "What? No! No... my expertise is strictly in my field. The little time I had left outside of work... I just wanted to spend it with my family..." His voice cracked as the last word escaped him. "My family..."

Steve's composure began to unravel, the memory of his loss pulling him into a spiral of grief. Sensing this, William leaned forward, his voice soft but firm. "Steve, I'm truly sorry for what you've been through. I understand this is a lot, but I need your help tying up some loose ends. If you can do that for me, I'll make sure you have the space you need to grieve in peace."



Steve nodded, swallowing hard as he regained some semblance of focus. "What do you need?"

William's voice was calm but deliberate. "I need you to think back to the moment you decided to commit the crime. Did you notice anything strange about My Reality? Anything out of the ordinary—something that didn't seem right?"

Steve furrowed his brow, the question forcing him to revisit the fateful day. "Something weird? I don't know... I just snapped. I wasn't myself. I was out of control..." He paused, his expression tightening as if struggling to remember. "It was just... quiet."

William's curiosity deepened. "Quiet?"

Steve hesitated before continuing. "The day before, the system wouldn't stop. It kept pushing me to buy some stress-relief pills, nagging me with ads and alerts about my anxiety levels. But that morning... it didn't do any of that. No ads, no alerts. It was just... quiet."

William's suspicions, already simmering beneath the surface, began to solidify. Something about Steve's statement fit too neatly with the anomaly he'd seen at the crime scene. "I see," he replied evenly, his mind already racing with possibilities.



He straightened, closing the file in his hands. "As I promised, you'll be left undisturbed until the formal process begins. Considering your circumstances, Steve, I urge you to seek psychological help. You've chosen a dark path, but that doesn't mean there's no way forward. Even if it feels hopeless now, you deserve the chance to find some measure of peace."

Steve nodded weakly, his gaze fixed on the table. William stood and left the room, the sound of the door clicking shut echoing softly behind him.

For a long moment, the room was silent. Steve sat alone, staring at his hands, his breathing shallow. Then, like the breaking of a dam, the silence gave way to the quiet, anguished sound of tears—tears of pain, loss, and a regret that words couldn't express.

In the hallway, William's steps were purposeful. His instincts told him there was more to this case than a simple system glitch. The quiet Steve described wasn't just an oversight—it was a deliberate absence. And William wasn't the kind of man to let such a thing go unexamined.

William sat at his desk, his eyes fixed on the streams of data flowing across his screen. His position granted him privileged access to most of the security-related data within the My Reality system. He combed through the video footage and access logs tied to both Steve and Allison, scrutinizing every detail. Yet, nothing appeared suspicious. No unauthorized access. No tampering with the video feeds. If someone had meddled, they had covered their tracks expertly.



Next, he turned his attention to the so-called code error that the technicians claimed had caused the system failure. While William wasn't a programming expert, his years of experience had given him a working knowledge of the basics. Still, to involve an expert and request a deeper investigation, he needed more than assumptions—he needed something concrete.

The corporation behind My Reality, Reality Labs, was fiercely protective of its software. They guarded their systems as if revealing even the smallest flaw might shatter their reputation. William knew firsthand how difficult it was to access the data he currently had. Reality Labs would prefer the police worked with second-hand, filtered information, sanitized to the point of uselessness. But the pervasive atmosphere of fear in society—cultivated and reinforced by mass media—had forced the corporation to allow limited direct access to the system. Without this concession, investigations like William's would be impossible.

He traced Steve's emotional trajectory, starting with the tragic moment he received the news of his family's death. The system had recorded the expected tension spikes, triggering its usual responses. Everything, at first glance, appeared to function as designed. Over the following hours, Steve's tension plateaued at a constant but elevated level—again, not unusual given the circumstances.



The challenge was sifting through the sheer volume of processes triggered during that time. Each spike in tension had set off hundreds of personalized advertising and recommendation processes, all tailored specifically to Steve. This bespoke system of advertising—designed to target each individual’s unique psychological profile—was almost impossible to decipher. It was like a DNA sequence, custom-built for every user. No two people had the same algorithm analyzing and selling to them. Comparing Steve’s data to others yielded nothing useful.

Undeterred, William fast-forwarded to the morning of the crime. Steve had left his house at exactly 8:00 a.m., heading toward Allison’s residence several streets away. William reviewed the video logs from Steve’s journey. True to Steve’s account, the morning had been eerily quiet. Not a single advertisement interrupted him—not even the usual barrage of product suggestions the system was known for.

This was unusual. The My Reality system ensured constant engagement unless users explicitly paid to reduce or eliminate ads. Steve’s financial records confirmed that he hadn’t opted for the ad-free experience. Based on his income level, Steve should have been receiving ads every ten minutes, at minimum.

Yet the logs showed two irrefutable facts:



1. Steve hadn't received any ads that morning, nor at any point during the day leading up to the crime.

2. He hadn't paid to disable ads.

William leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. On its own, this anomaly might not be enough to warrant a full-scale investigation. The corporation often rolled out experimental features or updates that broke parts of the system temporarily, leading to occasional glitches far more severe than this. To Reality Labs, a brief lapse in ad delivery would likely be dismissed as minor and irrelevant.

But this wasn't irrelevant. It was a potential clue—a piece of a larger puzzle. Something deliberate, perhaps. Or something more complex than a simple bug.

He stared at the screen, the weight of the decision pressing on him. This anomaly wasn't enough to shake the higher-ups into action, but it was something.

A thread to pull.

A possible pattern to uncover.



Chapter 5: Early wake up

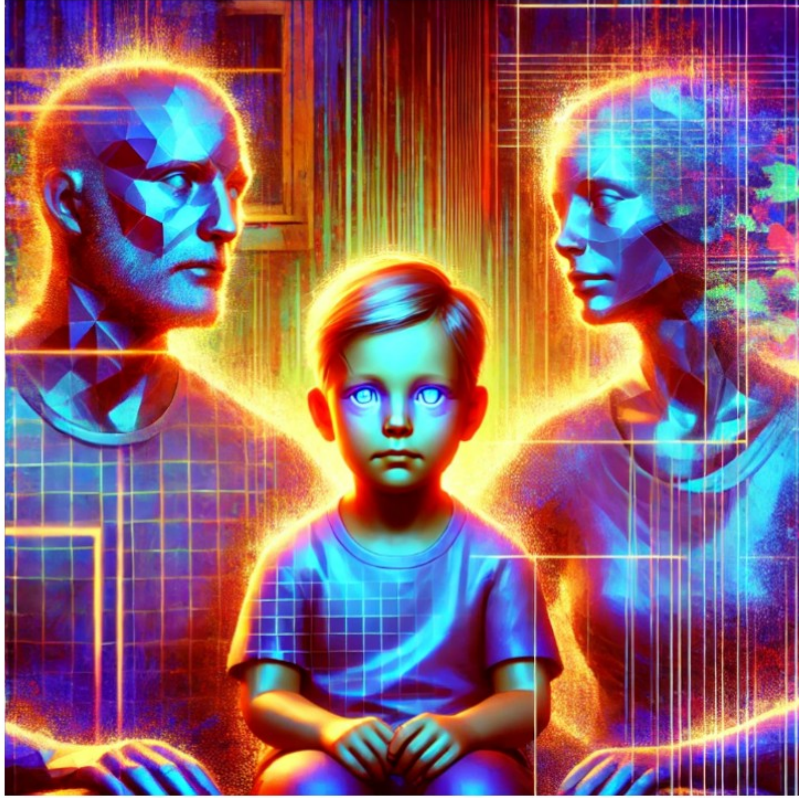
Luca was extraordinary. A one-in-a-generation anomaly.

In a world where every aspect of life was meticulously monitored and controlled, hacking the system from within required not just skill, but an almost incomprehensible brilliance. Luca had that brilliance—and he knew it.

The My Reality contact lenses were surgically implanted in every citizen at the tender age of five. The timing wasn't arbitrary; it was deliberate. By five, a child was just beginning to form a concrete understanding of the world around them. It was the perfect moment to overwrite that understanding, to replace reality with the state-approved illusion. Once the lenses were in, every action, every moment, would be monitored and recorded. Forever. Reality itself would become an algorithm, customized and sanitized, ensuring compliance and control.

That was the fate Luca refused to accept.

At just four years old, Luca understood something most adults couldn't grasp in a lifetime: the lenses were a prison. A life lived through them would never be free. His mind, sharper and more curious than those around him, began to notice the cracks in the façade. The smiles that never wavered. The happiness that seemed artificial. The endless, unspoken agreement to ignore the dissonance between the bright, colorful world people saw and the quiet misery that lay beneath.



It didn't take long for Luca to realize he couldn't trust his parents. To him, they seemed like drones—always smiling, always oblivious to their own oppression. It wasn't that they didn't love him. Luca never doubted their love. But it felt hollow, like a mechanical doll that spoke words of affection on command. His parents didn't see him. They saw what the system wanted them to see: the version of their child rendered by My Reality. They loved something that didn't truly exist.

It broke his heart.

Luca loved his parents with every fiber of his being. What he wanted more than anything was for them to see him as he really was—not the sanitized version, but the messy, imperfect, authentic Luca. He craved real love, the kind that came from genuine understanding. And though he could sense, deep beneath the layers of fake reality clouding their vision, a spark of true affection waiting to break free, it was buried too deep. Their smiles, their denial of the bleakness around them, their unshakable belief in the beauty of a world that didn't exist—it was unbearable.

Luca saw the world for what it truly was. He saw the filth that caked the streets, the ragged clothes barely holding together on people's backs, the unrelenting sickness that seemed to cling to every breath. He tasted the chemical-laden sludge that passed for food, its synthetic flavors masking the rot underneath. And everywhere he turned, he saw the same thing: blank, mindless smiles. Everyone—his parents included—wore that vacant expression, as if the AR lenses had erased the misery from their minds entirely. To them, everything was perfect.



Luca refused to swallow that pill.

At just four years old, he was powerless to change his fate directly. He understood that. The system was vast, omnipresent, and relentless. He knew of the underground—the shadowy subculture of people who had slipped free from the system's grasp and lived in forgotten places, disconnected from the grid. He admired their defiance, but to go underground meant giving up any chance of fighting back. It was his last resort.

What Luca needed wasn't escape; it was knowledge. Not the sanitized, corporate-approved version fed through the New Internet, but the raw, unfiltered truths of the world. He needed access to the old Internet.

Convincing his parents to buy him a computer wasn't difficult. He framed it as curiosity, a desire to explore and learn, and they happily indulged him. What they purchased was a basic model, designed primarily for accessing the beta prototypes of corporate software. It allowed limited access to the old Internet, but the operating system was tightly locked down, restricting flexibility. For most users, it was a dead end.

But Luca wasn't like most users.



Through careful experimentation, Luca discovered that the machine still had backdoors—leftovers from the rushed transition between the old Internet and the New Internet. These overlooked vulnerabilities allowed him to bypass the restrictions, granting him access to something far more valuable: a stealthy, underlying network hidden beneath the corporations' noses.

It was brilliant, Luca thought, marveling at the ingenuity of its creators. The underground had found a way to exploit the very systems designed to control them. They piggybacked on the corporate-approved video streams, embedding their communications within them. The technique took advantage of an old method from the early days of the Internet, one that prioritized speed over data integrity. By subtly altering a few bytes of a video stream—barely a fraction of a megabyte—they could transmit encrypted messages without compromising the video's quality.

The corporations, obsessed with optimizing user engagement, hadn't bothered to verify the integrity of the data packets. To them, if the video looked perfect, it was perfect. That oversight allowed the underground network to exist, riding unnoticed on the backs of toxic corporate propaganda streams.

Once Luca accessed this hidden network, an entire world opened before him. He discovered an underground society that had managed to carve out a fragile existence outside the system's control. They had built isolated, autonomous outposts across the cities, the only places where people could see reality as it truly was.



The network served as their lifeline. Through it, they coordinated the transportation of food and medicine between outposts, avoiding detection by the authorities. They shared alerts about incoming police raids, giving their people a chance to scatter before the crackdowns arrived. Every byte of information was precious, carried in the shadows of corporate video streams that otherwise sought to enslave minds.

To Luca, it was a revelation. The underground wasn't just surviving—they were fighting back.

Luca knew he had to take a leap. A risk so enormous it bordered on the unimaginable for someone his age. If he wanted to uncover more about the technology slated to imprison him—the lenses they would implant in just a year—he needed more than what his restricted device could provide. He needed real answers. And to get those, he had to contact the underground.

His first challenge was figuring out when and where a delivery would take place. After days of painstaking observation and piecing together fragmented information from the hidden network, he pinpointed a time and location.

At 2:00 a.m., Luca slipped out of his room. The streets in his part of the city were eerily quiet, as they always were at that hour. Anyone awake was either lost in the addictive experiences piped directly into their eyes by My Reality or confined to their apartments. In this neglected corner of the city, there was no police presence to speak of. The authorities had long since stopped patrolling these streets. Why bother when the system monitored everything? The police only appeared after the fact, to clean up the dead or detain those who had already been caught.



Luca made his way to the meeting point, his heart pounding with every step. He found a spot behind a cluster of overflowing trash containers, crouching low and trying to steady his breathing. But Luca, despite his brilliance, was no master of stealth. His nerves were raw, and his every movement betrayed his inexperience.

Just as the meeting was about to begin, a voice broke through the silence behind him. Low and calm, yet firm.

"Who the heck are you?"

Luca's heart stopped. Panic surged through him, and without thinking, he bolted from his hiding spot. But he didn't get far. A strong hand grabbed him effortlessly, lifting him off the ground like a feather. He struggled violently, thrashing and kicking, even biting the hand that held him. It was no use.

The man holding him laughed softly, amused by the boy's futile resistance. "Ha ha ha! This one's got some fire," he murmured, the hint of a smile in his voice.

Luca's strength gave out quickly. He was just a child, his small body no match for the grown man's solid grip. When the man saw the boy's energy had drained, he loosened his hold and gently set him down on the ground. Luca stood there, chest heaving, his mind racing with what to do next. Running was pointless. He wouldn't make it far.



After a long pause, the man spoke again, his tone calmer now. "Alright, young warrior," he said, crouching slightly to meet Luca's eyes. "Are you going to tell me what you're doing here, or do we need to start over?"

Luca hesitated. He knew he had no choice but to tell the truth. He'd been caught red-handed at their meeting point, and these people—the ones disconnected from the system—weren't fools. He wouldn't be able to outwit them.

"I... I wanted to know you," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

The man raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "Oh?" he said, his curiosity piqued. "And why would you want to know us?"

Luca swallowed hard, then took a deep breath. His words came out steady, but tinged with vulnerability, pointing outside with his little finger. "Because I don't want to be like them."

The man who had caught Luca was none other than Henry Walker, the leader of the underground network in the city. Henry's reputation preceded him—a man of quiet resolve and sharp instincts, trusted by the scattered remnants of the free world to keep their fragile network alive.



As the night stretched on, Luca found himself doing something he had never done before: trusting someone fully. He told Henry everything. How he had hacked his basic computer, found the secret communication system buried within the corporate video streams, and uncovered the details of this clandestine meeting. His voice wavered as he confessed his fears—how terrified he was of becoming like everyone else outside the underground, their minds clouded by the My Reality system. But he also spoke of his parents, the love he still held for them, and the guilt that gnawed at him at the thought of leaving them behind.

Henry listened intently, his silence encouraging Luca to keep going. When the boy finally stopped, his chest heaving slightly from the effort of letting it all out, Henry took a moment to gather his thoughts. The room felt still, the weight of Luca's story settling between them.

"Luca," Henry began, his voice steady, "do you realize what you've done?" He paused, letting his words sink in. "You are the first person—ever—to discover our communication system. For thirty years, since we first put it in place, no one outside our underground outposts has figured it out. Not once. Even when some of our people were captured, tortured, and killed, they never revealed this secret."



He exhaled deeply, his eyes meeting Luca's. "When you told me you knew about it, I had to fight the panic rising in my chest. I thought we were compromised. But then I heard your full story." Henry paused, a small, almost incredulous smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I'm glad I listened. Luca, you're one of us."

Luca blinked, unsure how to respond. The weight of Henry's words filled the room, and for the first time in a long while, he felt something like belonging.

Henry stood and moved to the stove, the small flame flickering as he poured hot water into two mismatched mugs. The scent of herbs filled the air as he handed one to Luca, who accepted it with a quiet, grateful nod.

"But you're not like the rest of us," Henry continued, his voice steady but filled with conviction. "Honestly, I don't think there's anyone like you in the entire world. The fact that, at just four years old, with no help, you've managed to get this far—it's extraordinary. Luca, you are extraordinary."

Luca looked down at his mug, the warmth seeping into his hands. His face flushed slightly, but his voice was clear when he finally spoke. "So, will you help me?"



Henry didn't hesitate. He set his mug down and leaned forward slightly, his expression softening with something that resembled pride. "Yes, Luca," he said, his tone deliberate and steady. "I'll help you with whatever you need."

In the year leading up to the implantation of the My Reality contact lenses, Luca spent every night slipping through the shadows to visit the underground community. By day, he lived under the watchful eyes of a world that never saw him as he truly was. By night, he immersed himself in the only place where reality existed unfiltered.

The conditions in the underground were undeniably harsh—scarce food, limited resources, and constant vigilance against discovery. But here, at least, people had something rare and precious: control over their lives. In the dim light of the outposts, Luca saw what he'd longed for his entire life. He saw love. Real love. Families who, despite their hardships, shared an unbreakable bond. Parents who looked at their children and truly saw them, their gazes unclouded by the AR filters that reduced everyone else to lifeless smiles.

Every time Luca witnessed these moments, it brought a sharp pain to his chest. A reminder of what he yearned for, and of the parents he loved but who could never see him for who he was. But Luca didn't let the pain consume him. Instead, he channeled it, transforming it into determination. If he worked hard enough, maybe—just maybe—he could find a way to free his parents from the beautiful nightmare they lived in.



Henry kept his word, providing everything Luca asked for. And when Henry didn't have what was needed, he reached out to other outposts, often at great personal risk, to bring it back. In the short time they'd known each other, Henry had become more than a mentor—he was a father figure. Through quiet conversations with other members of the underground, Luca learned of Henry's sacrifices and the burdens he carried to keep the outposts alive.

Years earlier, when a corporate raid had threatened to dismantle the network, Henry had allowed himself to be captured to save others. For a year, he endured brutal interrogations in the corporate-controlled police headquarters. They beat him, starved him, and subjected him to unspeakable tortures, but Henry refused to break. When his captors finally believed him dead after a savage beating, they dumped his broken body near a known gathering area for the outposts, intending to demoralize the community by displaying one of their own as a lifeless warning.

What they didn't know was that Henry was still alive. Barely. His rescue was a miracle, but the toll it had taken on him was evident. It took nearly a year for him to recover, and even then, he was forever changed. The trauma had claimed the sight in one eye, and his right leg had been replaced with a rudimentary prosthetic. Yet Henry never let his injuries define him. He returned to his leadership role stronger than ever, a symbol of resilience and hope for the underground.



Henry's strength wasn't just physical; it was his humility and determination that made him a true leader. He wasn't afraid to ask for help, and he inspired loyalty not through fear, but through trust. Henry was there for his people, and they, in turn, would do anything for him.

Luca absorbed these stories, each one solidifying his admiration for Henry. In the underground, surrounded by people who lived in the harshest conditions but still chose freedom over illusion, Luca found a purpose greater than himself. He wasn't just working to free his parents—he was fighting for a world where no one would have to live behind a mask.

And as Henry's unwavering support fueled his determination, Luca knew one thing with certainty: he wasn't alone anymore.

Once Luca acquired a laptop capable of seamlessly bridging the old Internet and the New Internet, his progress accelerated dramatically. The device was a rare find, a relic in itself, and yet it provided the exact flexibility Luca needed. His first major breakthrough came when he managed to obtain the schematics for the My Reality contact lens implants, along with the BIOS system that governed their most essential hardware functions.



The BIOS—Basic Input and Output System—was a relic of an earlier technological age, often overlooked amidst the sleekness of modern interfaces. But for Luca, it was a treasure trove of potential. Nestled deep within the circuitry, the BIOS acted as the silent architect of the hardware's soul, controlling the foundational processes that allowed the device to function. Unlike software that left footprints in logs or firmware updates that raised immediate red flags, modifications to the BIOS were stealthier, virtually invisible except to the most exhaustive audits.

It didn't take long for Luca to unravel the intricate workings of the system. In just a few days, he had reverse-engineered its vulnerabilities, crafting a custom script capable of exploiting them. His goal was ambitious yet precise: to create a video loop capturing the last five minutes of activity. This loop could be triggered on command, feeding the system a seamless stream of fabricated input that mimicked real-time activity. With this, Luca could perform actions hidden from the prying eyes of the My Reality algorithms.

But while his script was brilliant in theory, implementing it presented a monumental challenge. Testing the hack required activating a real pair of contact lenses. The underground had managed to salvage several pairs from the bodies of those who had died on the streets, victims of the system's failures or its brutal enforcement. Yet, turning them on posed an extreme risk.



The contact lenses were equipped with an unforgiving security protocol. Any activation outside of their authorized users triggered an immediate military-grade response. Within five minutes of powering on a stolen device, a military police squad would be deployed to the location of activation, armed and authorized to neutralize any threat.

It was a gamble, and everyone in the outpost knew it. Testing Luca's hack meant exposing themselves to the full force of the system's wrath. But it was a gamble they had to take. Even the most exceptional work rarely succeeded on the first attempt without real-world testing.

Henry, ever the voice of reason, gathered the team to discuss the risks. "We can't let fear stop us," he said, his one good eye scanning the faces of those around him. "What Luca has built could be the key to something bigger than any one of us. But we have to be smart. If we test this, it has to be quick, precise, and with an immediate plan to relocate if it goes wrong."

Luca, sitting at the edge of the room, felt the weight of their trust pressing on his young shoulders. He understood the stakes better than anyone. His mind raced as he recalculated every line of code, every variable, ensuring there were no errors. This wasn't just a test of his ingenuity—it was a test of their faith in him.



As the group finalized their plan, the tension was palpable. They were about to provoke the system that ruled their lives with an iron grip, and the margin for error was nonexistent.

But Luca didn't flinch. He had come too far to let fear dictate his actions now.

Henry, Luca, and two other members of the outpost carefully made their way to an abandoned industrial zone on the outskirts of the city. The area was a decaying labyrinth, its skeletal buildings long forgotten by the rest of society. Rusted machinery and crumbling walls littered the landscape, giving the place an air of silent menace. Even those disconnected from the system avoided it, wary of the chemical residues that still lingered, remnants of a bygone era of manufacturing excess.

But for this test, it was the perfect location. The dangerous terrain and maze-like layout offered potential escape routes if things went wrong. The disrepair of the buildings, with walls on the verge of collapse, might slow down any pursuit. It wasn't the first time Henry and his team had been here; they knew the area intimately, including every shortcut and hiding spot.



At 3:00 a.m., the group reached the chosen building, its roof partially caved in and the air thick with the metallic tang of rust. They worked quickly, setting up in the building's main hall. Luca's laptop glowed faintly in the darkness, the only source of light other than their handheld torches. He had everything prepared to wirelessly connect to the My Reality contact lenses the moment they were powered on.

The stakes were clear: once the testing began, the military police would arrive within five minutes. To verify that Luca's hack had succeeded, they would need to wait an agonizingly long minute to confirm the result. If the test failed, they would have to repeat the process, leaving them with almost no margin for error.

Henry stood beside Luca, holding the contact lenses in his scarred hand. His one good eye darted between the boy and the surroundings, his focus unwavering. The other two members of the team—wiry and alert—were stationed at opposite ends of the building, watching for any signs of danger. Every creak, every faint gust of wind, set their nerves on edge.

Luca's hands hovered over the keyboard, trembling slightly as he adjusted the final parameters. His heart pounded in his chest, but his resolve was unshaken. This was what he'd been working toward, the culmination of months of preparation. He inhaled deeply, willing the fear to loosen its grip on him.



"It's time," he said, his voice steady despite the tension coiled inside him. He looked at Henry and gave a small nod. "Now."

Henry didn't hesitate. With a practiced motion, he powered on the contact lenses.

The small device blinked to life, its circuits humming faintly as it connected to the New Internet. Luca's laptop sprang into action, streams of data flooding the screen as the system attempted to authenticate the stolen hardware.

The countdown began.

The moment Luca detected the contact lenses on the wireless network he had set up, he connected, uploaded his script, and ran it. The entire process took just 20 seconds. Now, all they could do was wait for one minute to see the results.

But waiting wasn't in Luca's nature. He had prepared backup scripts for this very scenario. If the first test failed, he was ready to try again immediately.

01:20. The first test failed.

The error logs Luca had pre-programmed the script to collect appeared on his laptop. His fingers moved swiftly as he scanned the data, searching for the problem. He signaled Henry to power-cycle the device. They had to try the next script without delay.



01:50. The second test began.

As the new script executed, Luca dove into the logs from the first test, dissecting the entries for clues. His sharp eyes narrowed as he found something unexpected: an entry for an invalid memory address. By the schematics, that code block corresponded to a routine verification of the universal time via the New Internet. It was supposed to be a simple read operation.

Unless...

A creeping suspicion took root in Luca's mind.

02:50. The second test failed.

The tension in the room grew palpable. The other two members of the outpost exchanged nervous glances, their fear mounting with each passing second. Even Henry, steady as ever, showed cracks in his resolve. But Luca didn't have time to explain his theory. He was already typing furiously, patching a solution to what he believed was the problem.

04:00. Luca stopped the third test himself, instructing Henry to power-cycle the device once more.

04:20. The fourth test began.



It was then that they heard the unmistakable sound of rotor blades cutting through the night air. The military police chopper was closing in. They were out of time.

Henry barked out orders. The team immediately pivoted to their escape plan, moving quickly through the rubble-strewn labyrinth of abandoned buildings. But with the device still powered on, the chopper would home in on their signal. Improvisation was their only option.

Henry scooped Luca into his arms, while another team member grabbed Luca's laptop. They sprinted through the dark, weaving through collapsing walls and rusted machinery as the chopper loomed ever closer. The spotlight swept the ground, missing them by mere feet.

05:20. On Luca's laptop screen, the black terminal displayed a single word in bright green letters: SUCCESS.

Henry didn't hesitate. He handed Luca to one of the others and grabbed the contact lenses. Without a word, he bolted in the opposite direction, the device clutched tightly in his hand. The chopper's spotlight veered, locking onto him. He didn't look back.

The rest of the team, carrying Luca and his laptop, slipped away into the shadows. Thanks to Henry's sacrifice, they managed to leave the area undetected.



The hours that followed back at the underground outpost were the longest of Luca's young life. Every second dragged, his mind racing with horrific scenarios of what might have become of Henry. The man who had risked everything for them could be dead, captured, or worse. The thought was unbearable.

And then, just as despair began to set in, Henry walked into the outpost. He was smiling as if he'd simply gone for a leisurely stroll.

Luca ran to him, tears streaming down his face, and threw his arms around him with all the strength he could muster. It was the happiest moment of his life, relief pouring out of him in sobs of joy. Henry, his steady presence as unshakable as ever, patted Luca's back gently, his smile never fading.

When the emotions finally settled, and Luca had wiped his tear-streaked face, Henry asked, "So, kid, what was the problem?"

Luca grinned through the remnants of his tears, his sharp mind already miles ahead. "The code wasn't actually checking the time on the Internet. They just used a dirty shortcut—and never bothered to fix it."



Chapter 6: ImMORTality

Our man closed the report on Allison's murder, his expression unreadable beneath the youthful veneer of his prosthetic face. It was the first time the My Reality system had failed so catastrophically, and the implications of such a public debacle burned like acid in his mechanical veins. Fury simmered beneath his calm demeanor—a silent, methodical rage that demanded action.

He rose from his opulent desk, the faint hum of servos accompanying his every movement. The office—an architectural masterpiece suspended high above the city—was a testament to his unchallenged dominance. Glass walls displayed a curated illusion of a pristine skyline, a reality meticulously designed by his system. Yet even in this manufactured paradise, he felt the weight of imperfection. Somewhere beneath his empire, cracks were forming.

A lesson was needed.

Delivered in person.

The man who had conquered the world was still alive at 120 years old, though whether he could still be called a man was a question few dared to ask. But the question lingered, even unspoken, like the riddle of Theseus' ship—a philosophical quandary for the ages.



Do you know the story? Athenian caretakers, striving to preserve the great hero's vessel, replaced its decaying planks one by one until, eventually, none of the original parts remained. Was it still Theseus' ship, or had it become something entirely new?

For this man—this overlord of a shattered age—the same riddle applied. Piece by piece, the humanity he was born with had been replaced, until what remained was more machine than man.

His legs and arms were fully robotic, precision-forged and perfectly synchronized to the neural pathways of his brain. Achieving such harmony between flesh and metal had not come easily. The path was paved with the bodies of countless human test subjects—sacrificed in dangerous, unregulated trials once ethical barriers had been eradicated. To him, their deaths were no more significant than the loss of lab rats.

The transformation extended further. His face—an image of perfection modeled after a man in his early thirties—was a prosthetic marvel. Thirty years earlier, a cascade of allergic reactions to endless cosmetic surgeries had left his original visage grotesquely disfigured. The synthetic face now covering the damage was a masterwork of biomimicry, its flawless skin a mere mask. Only his eyes, mouth, and ears connected to the prosthetic remained his own.



And his hair—always dyed a youthful jet black—was the last superficial claim to his organic humanity. Somehow, it had survived decades of chemical abuse, as though defying the inevitability of time.

The rest of his biological self was confined to his torso. His internal organs and genitals, the final vestiges of his humanity, persisted with the help of relentless technological intervention. Over the years, he had replaced his liver twice, his heart once, and subjected his cells to experimental anti-aging treatments that pushed the boundaries of biotechnology. Advanced procedures slowed oxidation and cellular decay, keeping him alive far beyond natural limits.

Like all those drunk on power, he considered himself indispensable. In his mind, the radical changes he had made to his body were not just for himself—they were sacrifices for the greater good of humanity. His actions, no matter how extreme, were necessary to ensure that the flawless system he had built would endure, untouched, for as long as possible. He saw himself as the linchpin holding together the fragile order of the world, the one irreplaceable piece in a machine that could never be allowed to fail.

Yet even he could not escape the pull of time. Despite his best efforts to stave off the inevitable, his brain—his final and most vulnerable link to mortality—had begun to falter. Subtle lapses, fleeting moments of confusion, cracks in the mental fortress that had sustained him for over a century. The scientists he employed to monitor his condition assured him there was nothing to fear, their smiles thin and forced, their voices carefully measured. But he knew better.



He pressed them for the truth, forcing their trembling lips to confess. No matter how many neural enhancements he employed or how many experimental drugs he consumed, his organic mind was failing. Five years, they said. At best. After that, his brain would collapse, leaving him little more than an empty shell.

But he had anticipated this moment. He always anticipated.

His backup plan had been in motion for decades. By the time he reached 90, he had recognized the limits of his flesh and the uselessness of his team in halting the aging process. So, he redirected his efforts. The AI Project. It was an audacious ambition: to imprint his consciousness onto a machine that could rule eternally in his place. For over thirty years, he worked relentlessly to train the AI, feeding it data on his thoughts, decisions, and personality. The process was painstakingly slow, requiring millions of records to create a model that truly reflected him.

Only recently had the results begun to meet his expectations. The AI was no longer spitting out abstract hallucinations but providing conclusions he might have reached himself. Still, it was far from perfect. Its greatest flaw lay in its reluctance to make the hard choices—the ruthless, necessary sacrifices that had propelled him to power. Embedded within its code were vestiges of human empathy, a trait he viewed as a dangerous weakness. Time and time again, the AI hesitated, balking at decisions that required absolute, unwavering resolve.



His development team, initially resistant to altering the AI's core principles, eventually yielded under his unrelenting pressure. Bit by bit, those empathy constraints were stripped away. The AI was learning to embrace pragmatism, to prioritize efficiency over sentiment. But it wasn't enough. Not yet. And time was slipping through his grasp.

As he poured himself into refining the AI, he faced an infuriating reality: people were growing stupider. It was a maddening trend he had noticed over the decades—a steady decline in the competence of those around him.

Eighty years ago, finding talent had been simple. The ambitious, the brilliant, the driven—they had flocked to his cause, eager to prove themselves in his world. If someone failed to deliver, he pushed them to their limits. They either rose to the occasion or were replaced by someone who could handle the pressure. It had been a brutal but efficient system.

Now, there were no replacements. The elites, the only ones granted access to the education and resources necessary to maintain his system, were lazy. Spoiled brats who did the bare minimum, coasting on the achievements of those who came before them. No matter how much he invested in their training, they produced nothing of value—merely recycling discoveries made half a century ago.



He couldn't comprehend it. What had happened to ambition? To genius?

By all measures, he was a genius among geniuses. But he felt increasingly like the last of his kind, surrounded by mediocrity. The decay of talent forced him to spend more and more of his time micromanaging tasks that once would have been beneath him, dragging others up to his impossible standards. It was a distraction he could ill afford, a waste of precious time that could be spent perfecting his legacy—his immortal AI.

The heavy, metallic doors to the backend development team's subterranean office hissed open, a low, mechanical groan that announced impending doom. The retinal scanner had verified the identity of the man approaching, but it wasn't necessary. His arrival was already heralded by the cold, deliberate rhythm of his steps—a metallic clink that echoed down the sterile corridors.

Inside, the hum of quiet conversation and the clicking of keyboards fell into an unnatural silence. Heads turned toward the door, faces draining of color as he entered. He strode in, his towering figure framed by the clinical glow of overhead lights, the gleaming surfaces of his mechanical limbs reflecting their sterile shine. He wore no shoes over his prosthetic legs; the sharp, unforgiving sound of his steps was his preferred announcement. Let them hear him coming. Let them fear it.



His gaze swept the room, dissecting the people within as if calculating their worth—or lack thereof. The mask-like perfection of his prosthetic face betrayed no emotion, but the weight of his presence pressed down like a physical force. One by one, the employees averted their eyes, hoping to escape his attention. They knew the unspoken rule: If he comes in person, it's already too late.

He halted at the center of the room, his posture rigid, his shadow sprawling across the polished floor like a specter of judgment. When he spoke, it was an explosion that shattered the oppressive quiet.

"HOW THE HELL DID OUR SYSTEM FAIL THIS BADLY?!"

The room collectively flinched. Not a single voice dared to respond. They had all heard the stories—the tirades, the threats, the punishments. No one wanted to be the one to draw his ire further.

He didn't wait long. His voice, sharper than the sound of his steps, sliced through the silence.

"I WANT AN EXPLANATION. NOW. UNLESS YOU ALL WANT TO LOSE YOUR HIGH-CLASS STATUS AND FIND YOURSELVES DUMPED INTO THE LOW-CLASS SLUMS WITH NOTHING!"



Panic rippled through the room. Desperation replaced paralysis as employees exchanged frantic glances. Someone had to answer—anyone. After a long, excruciating pause, the team's manager stepped forward, his face pale, his hands trembling.

"W-We've been analyzing all the data from the last avatar simulation test," he stammered, his voice barely steady. "We're making progress in identifying what might have caused the fai—"

"ARE YOU BEYOND STUPID?!" Our man's voice erupted again, a brutal force that shook the air. "I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT YOUR PITIFUL TESTS! I'M TALKING ABOUT A MURDER—A CITIZEN DEAD IN PLAIN SIGHT!"

The manager visibly shrank, his trembling intensifying. "... About that," he murmured, barely audible, "we've identified the issue. It seems a random process altered the threshold for detecting danger. The problem has been fixed, and we believe it won't happ—"

"'WE BELIEVE'?! A RANDOM PROCESS?! HOW STUPID DO YOU THINK I AM?!" His rage peaked, a towering inferno threatening to consume the hapless manager, whose lips moved silently, unable to form a reply.

Two figures appeared at the doorway—security personnel in crisp uniforms. Without hesitation, they strode in and seized the manager by his arms. He resisted weakly, his voice rising to a wail as they dragged him toward the exit. "No! Please, no! Give me another chance! I can fix this! I swear—!"



The pleas echoed through the room, unanswered, as the security guards hauled him out of sight. The remaining employees stared straight ahead, paralyzed by fear. The room seemed colder now, as if the air itself had been chilled by the exchange.

Our man turned back to the cowering team, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed them. His voice was a thunderclap of finality.

"THIS WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

A ripple of nods spread through the room, stiff and mechanical, as if each person feared a single misplaced motion might draw his attention.

Satisfied—for now—he turned on his heel and strode out, his metallic footsteps fading into the distance. The silence he left behind was heavier than before, thick with the unspoken relief of those who had survived the storm. For now.

Every so often, he allowed himself the satisfaction of what he called a productive day. And today had been very productive



On his way back to his office, our man made a detour to the laboratory—the nerve center of his most cherished project. The AI being developed within these walls was not merely a tool; it was his legacy, the embodiment of his will, and the promise of his eternal dominion.

Unlike the tense atmosphere of the basement development team, the laboratory exuded calm efficiency. His presence here was routine, expected even, as he made daily visits to monitor progress. As he entered, heads turned briefly in acknowledgment, but there was no fear on their faces. This was his sanctuary, a place where he allowed questions—any questions—without restraint. Here, curiosity was not punished but encouraged, as long as it served the ultimate goal. And he always answered, no matter how probing the inquiry. Nothing was off-limits.

He walked with purpose, bypassing workstations and nodding curtly to those he passed. His steps carried him straight to the lead scientist overseeing the latest test—a test that had consumed his thoughts since the morning report.

"Do we have results?" he asked, his voice calm, almost pleasant.

The scientist turned from his workstation, meeting his gaze without hesitation. Unlike so many others under his employ, this man had learned not to cower. Respect, not fear, governed their dynamic.



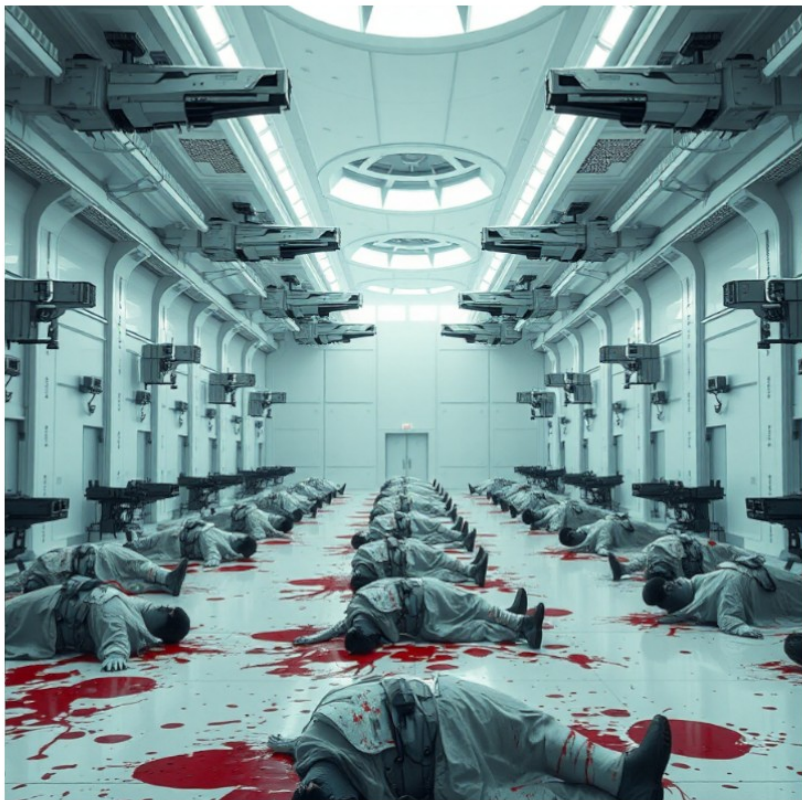
"Yes, sir," the scientist replied, rising from his chair. "If you'd follow me, I'll show you."

They moved through the labyrinthine corridors of the lab, sterile and bright under the hum of fluorescent lights. The faint echo of their footsteps was the only sound, a quiet prelude to the presentation. At last, they arrived at a small observation room outfitted with a one-way mirror, the kind used in police interrogation rooms to observe subjects without being seen.

On the other side of the glass lay a cavernous chamber, starkly lit and ominously silent. The first detail to catch the eye was the arsenal of high-caliber machine guns mounted on the ceiling. The weapons moved with an eerie precision, scanning the room as though hunting for any lingering threat. Below them, the floor was littered with bodies—mangled forms sprawled in grotesque stillness. Many were missing limbs, the brutal aftermath of a firing squad calibrated to leave no doubt about its effectiveness.

The scientist gestured toward the macabre scene and began his explanation, his tone clinical, devoid of emotion.

"As anticipated, several prisoners from the underground outpost attempted to convince the AI of their willingness to integrate fully into the system," he began. "The test was designed to evaluate whether the AI could be swayed by such claims. The goal was to determine its capacity for discernment and its ability to weigh long-term consequences over immediate benefits."



He paused, his gaze shifting to the mirrored glass, where the mounted guns had finally gone still.

"The AI accurately identified that a number of the prisoners were being truthful," he continued. "Under earlier iterations of the program, those individuals would have been spared. However, with the latest training enhancements, the AI reached a different conclusion."

The scientist turned to face our man directly, delivering the final assessment.

"It determined that the greater good required a precedent—an example to discourage dissent in the future. Even those who posed no immediate threat were executed to reinforce the consequences of deviation. The prisoners were eliminated swiftly, ensuring no opportunity for others to misinterpret the message. The test has been a success. The AI now demonstrates a solid understanding of the necessity of difficult decisions for the greater good."

For a moment, silence hung in the air. Then, the prosthetic features of our man's face shifted, the faintest suggestion of a smile forming at the corners of his synthetic lips.

"Good," he said, his voice low but firm.

He turned back to the mirrored glass, surveying the results with a sense of satisfaction. The AI was learning. The flaws of human empathy, those irritating obstacles to efficiency, were being stripped away piece by piece. They were getting closer.



Chapter 7: Sofia

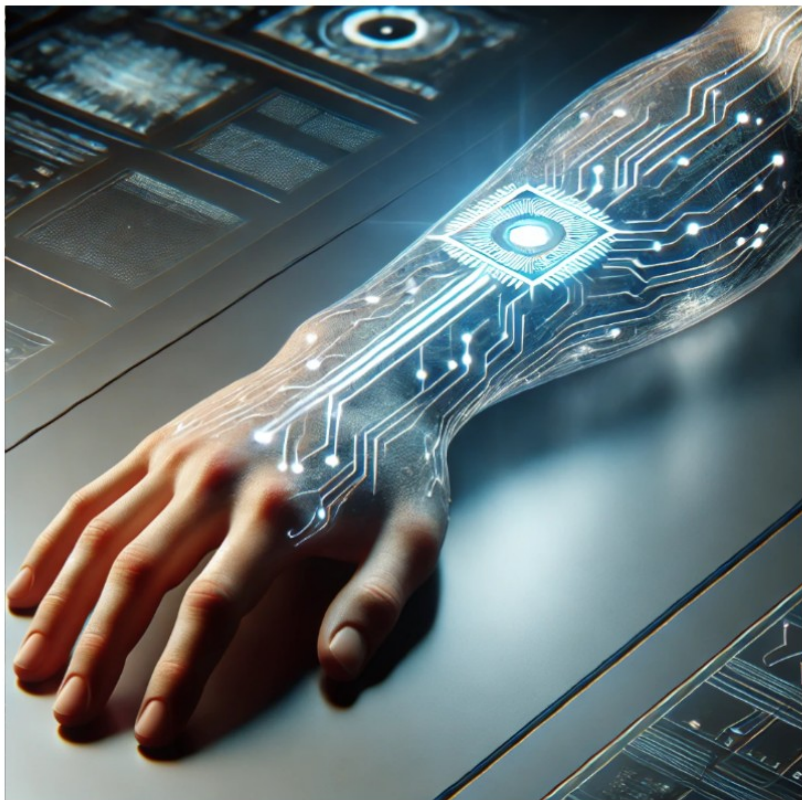
Luca's first real test had a singular, ambitious purpose: to determine whether it was possible to deceive the My Reality system for an extended period of time. Not just for a fleeting moment or a minor subversion—but to truly cheat the system, creating individuals who could move undetected within its omnipresent surveillance.

The goal was clear: to get the perfect camouflage.

Luca's scripts were tied to two test subjects, their profiles carefully chosen to mirror the average security access of most citizens. Through his code, he sought to manipulate the system's data streams, filtering and altering information in real time. Whenever the system checked for updates or analyzed the actions of these two individuals, it would see nothing out of the ordinary—a carefully crafted facade hiding reality. The test was simple in theory but monumental in execution: could the camouflage work to infiltrate the system without triggering alarms?

But there was a glaring problem. A massive one.

The test subjects were low-level, ordinary citizens with average security profiles. Luca's scripts worked well for them, but his method fell apart the moment it encountered high-security profiles or restricted areas. For those, the challenge wasn't just about hacking into software—it was about overcoming hardware barriers.



High-security personnel carried something far more advanced: a microchip implanted beneath their skin. This system was completely independent, operating on an isolated network with no direct connection to either the New Internet or the underground's archaic old Internet. Its sole function was to validate authorization codes in a closed loop, ensuring no possible external interference.

The creator of this system had been a genius. Paranoid, yes, but brilliant. He had designed it with one unshakable principle: isolation. There were no backdoors, no hidden exploits, no vulnerabilities in the code. Unlike the ubiquitous contact lenses, which were everywhere and could be studied or stolen, the underground had never managed to get their hands on one of these microchips.

And without access to even a single chip—or the secret documentation detailing its workings—Luca had hit a wall.

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on a cluttered desk as he rubbed his temples, trying to focus. The underground's dimly lit hideout was buzzing with activity around him, but he barely noticed. His mind churned, grasping for a solution.



To infiltrate the true heart of the beast—the central mainframe of operations—the camouflage needed to go further. His scripts could get them close, perhaps to the perimeter of the system's defenses. But they couldn't breach the innermost sanctum. That required something more, something he didn't yet have.

They needed to become the beast's own.

They needed to mimic not just its outer workings but its very core.

But for that, they needed something extraordinary.

- A functional microchip.
- And the documentation detailing how it functioned.

Luca tapped his fingers rhythmically against the desk, staring at the tangled mess of notes and diagrams in front of him. He had always prided himself on finding ways into systems others deemed impenetrable. But this... this was different. He didn't even have a blueprint to work from, only the faintest echoes of rumors and scraps of data gathered from scattered underground sources.

He exhaled sharply, frustration bubbling to the surface. Without a chip to study, he had no way to reverse-engineer the system. Without the documentation, he couldn't even begin to understand its architecture.



And yet, giving up wasn't an option.

He stared at the flickering lightbulb hanging above him, its faint hum filling the silence as his thoughts raced. The answer wasn't in the system, he realized—it was in the people.

If they couldn't infiltrate the beast themselves, they needed someone who already belonged to it.

They needed a son of the beast to come to them.

But how?

The idea of ambushing a military security squad to obtain one of their microchips was tempting—but flawed. Luca knew the risks all too well. Those microchips were designed to self-destruct if the bearer's vital signs flatlined. Even if they managed to overpower a soldier and extract the chip, the moment it detected the absence of a pulse, it would likely burn itself out, rendering it useless.

No, that wasn't the way forward. He needed a new approach.

Luca leaned back in his chair, staring at the flickering lines of code on his monitor. The documentation. That was the key. Before worrying about hardware, he had to figure out if there was any possible way to access the system's technical documentation. Without it, they were blind. Unfortunately, the documentation was as heavily guarded as the microchips themselves.



Which brought him back to square one: the people.

Who had access to that level of classified information?

Luca's fingers flew across the keyboard as he searched the underground network's intelligence files, cross-referencing public and private records. His screen populated with names, ranks, and profiles—an exclusive list of individuals authorized to access the documentation. As expected, the majority were predictable: high-ranking military personnel, elite system administrators, and powerful corporate executives.

But then a name caught his eye, stopping him mid-scroll.

Sofia Carter.

The name stood out not for its familiarity, but for its oddity. Sofia's profile was unlike the others on the list. She wasn't military or technical staff. She wasn't an executive or a high-level engineer. She was... a historian documentalist.

Luca frowned, curiosity igniting his mind. Why on Earth would someone with her background have access to such sensitive material?



He dove deeper into her records, pulling every thread he could find. Sofia Carter was around his age, just thirty years old. She had built her career studying the evolution of technology through history, a field that seemed worlds apart from the cold, clinical work of security protocols. But then he found it: a thesis she had written for her doctorate years ago.

Luca's heart quickened as he skimmed through the document. It was a meticulous exploration of technological development, tracing the roots of current innovations back through decades of experimentation and failure. And there, buried within the text, was a passing mention of the security system. The thesis didn't reveal any critical information, of course—it was academic, sanitized for public consumption. But its very existence explained why she would be granted access to the documentation.

Luca sat back, his mind racing. Sofia Carter represented something unexpected—a potential vulnerability. While military officers and corporate executives were hardened against threats, Sofia's academic background suggested a different kind of person. Someone who might be curious. Someone who might question.

She could be the thread he needed to pull.



Hacking directly into Sofia Carter's profile was out of the question. Like all high-security personnel, she had the microchip implanted—a fortress of isolation that Luca dared not attempt to breach. The risk was simply too great. But Sofia had one vulnerability, one that Luca had painstakingly uncovered: her day-to-day life as a professor.

The academic world she inhabited offered a rare loophole. Professors, students, and most staff at her college didn't carry the microchip. That lack of direct integration made it the perfect environment for Luca to test a software tool he had been quietly developing—a program designed to piggyback on the My Reality system. It allowed him to replicate the augmented reality feed from another person's lenses, seeing exactly what they saw.

For months, Luca used this tool to shadow Sofia, hopping between the profiles of her students, colleagues, and anyone else who interacted with her. It was invasive—he knew that—but necessary. She was the only lead he had.

The more he watched, the more he realized how different she was. In a society where ambition often manifested as cutthroat opportunism, Sofia was an anomaly. She was humble, genuine, and entirely uninterested in the power plays that defined the corporate elite. She loved her books, her teaching, and the solace of the few remaining parks untouched by the relentless march of construction.



Yet it wasn't just her character that made her unique. It was her privilege.

Sofia's profile had something exceptional—something Luca had never seen before. Unlike anyone else outside the corporate overlords, she had the ability to completely disable the augmented reality filters. Not the partial disconnection allowed to the masses, which still projected a curated version of the world. A total disconnection.

She could see reality as it truly was.

Luca's assumption was that this extraordinary feature stemmed from her work on her thesis, granting her unrestricted access during its preparation. But what struck him most was her awareness of the system's surveillance. She used this privilege sparingly, cautiously. When she was alone—in her office, her apartment, or during her solitary walks—she disabled the filters without hesitation, savoring the unfiltered truth of the world. But as soon as she sensed another person approaching, she reactivated the system. She wasn't naïve; she understood the dangers of being flagged for stepping too far out of bounds.

Yet for all her caution, Luca doubted Sofia fully understood just how exceptionally rare her privilege was. She was one of the few individuals who could truly disappear—leaving no trace of her movements in the system. Most likely, she assumed this feature was a relic of her work, overlooked by the corporation.



But to Luca, it was everything.

Her ability to vanish meant one crucial thing: when accessing the most sensitive parts of the mainframe, Sofia likely moved without augmented reality distortions. No filters, no surveillance. Pure reality.

It was a revelation of monumental importance. If Sofia could navigate the corporate fortress unfiltered, she might hold the key to accessing the documentation he needed. And she likely didn't even realize it.

Luca's heart pounded as he pieced together his plan. He would have to contact her, an act fraught with risk. If she suspected his motives or alerted the authorities, his entire operation could be exposed. But if she agreed to help—or if he could convince her, even unknowingly—she could be the breakthrough he needed to infiltrate the beast.

He stared at his screen, the faint glow illuminating his determined expression.

He needed to take the risk. He needed to contact her.



Chapter 8: TrACks

The report came through in the early hours of the morning, just as William was pouring his third cup of coffee. He scanned the details, and his heart skipped a beat. Another incident.

For months, William had been chasing whispers—complaints or reports of interruptions in the constant stream of advertisements fed into people’s augmented reality. Most citizens didn’t bother reporting such anomalies. Who would? Ads were an intrusive, despised part of daily life, a price everyone paid for access to the conveniences of My Reality. People grumbled about them, accepted them begrudgingly, and moved on.

But this... this was different.

The new report detailed a sudden, unexplained interruption. The affected individual was a college student in the sprawling cafeteria of a major university. On the surface, it seemed unremarkable: just another young man who likely chalked up the anomaly to a glitch. But to William, it was a beacon of hope—a thread to pull.

The first report had led nowhere, a dead-end investigation in a busy public space. But now, with a second incident in the same location, his instincts told him there was more to this than coincidence.



William dove into the video footage from the cafeteria during the reported time. The student in question seemed ordinary enough, his profile revealing nothing suspicious. But the cafeteria was a hive of activity, teeming with people coming and going. Over the course of an hour, the student had likely encountered over a thousand individuals—an overwhelming number of leads to sift through.

Still, William persisted. Methodically, he cross-referenced every face that appeared in the footage with the profiles logged in My Reality's database. His eyes burned from staring at the endless stream of data, but he pressed on. He couldn't let this slip through his fingers.

The profiles were as mundane as expected. Most of the students were preoccupied with trivialities—swapping lecture notes, nursing hangovers, or finding clever ways to purchase alcohol underage. There was no hint of a skilled hacker among them.

William turned his focus to the professors present during the hour. He flagged 20 individuals for closer scrutiny. Two, in particular, caught his attention: one from the electrical engineering department and the other a computer engineering specialist.



The computer engineering professor immediately piqued William's curiosity. A hacker, perhaps? Someone with the skills to manipulate My Reality's systems? But after a full day of digging into the man's background, William found nothing remotely incriminating. The professor's most notable pursuit was an independent video game project he'd been working on for five years. The poor guy was waiting for corporate approval to publish it—a near-impossible feat for anyone outside the Reality Labs conglomerate. William couldn't help but pity him. Another dead end.

The electrical engineering professor proved equally unremarkable, with little to his name besides a penchant for heavy drinking. The rest of the professors—specialists in medicine, economics, literature, and the like—led quiet, predictable lives. William noted their love of books, conferences, and academic musings but found no evidence to suggest any of them were capable of the level of sophistication required for the hack.

For three long months, the investigation ground to a halt. With no new reports, William began to lose hope. Each passing day without progress eroded his confidence, the weight of the unsolved mystery pressing heavier on his shoulders.



Then, another report landed on his desk.

The same university cafeteria. A different student. The same anomaly.

This time, William combed through the footage with renewed determination, scanning every frame for a lead. As before, the affected student appeared to be nothing special. But this time, something caught his eye.

A face.

Among the countless individuals captured in both incidents, one person appeared in the footage from both events: Sofia Carter.

William froze, his mind racing as he pulled up Sofia's profile. A historian and professor, her credentials seemed far removed from the technical expertise he'd been searching for. Yet her consistent presence in both cases was too significant to ignore.

Who was she? A coincidence? A connection?

He leaned forward, scrutinizing her records. Her history was unremarkable on the surface, but William's instincts told him there was something more. She didn't fit the profile he'd been building in his mind, but patterns didn't lie.



For the first time in months, William felt the spark of a lead. Sofia Carter had just become the focal point of his investigation.

And he was going to find out why.



Chapter 9: Observed

"Damn it!" Luca slammed his fist on the desk, the cluttered array of screens around him flickering under the motion. He had made a mistake—a serious one. He'd left a door open. And now, someone had found it.

For days, Luca had noticed an unusual figure appearing in the video feeds he had hacked through Sofia's contact lenses. At first, he dismissed the man as a neighbor—just someone who happened to cross paths with Sofia near her apartment. But when he spotted the same man in the bustling crowd of the college cafeteria, his instincts flared.

The man was too deliberate.

At a glance, he moved like everyone else—casual, unremarkable. But Luca had spent years mastering the art of blending in, learning to move unnoticed through the crowd. This man's subtle awareness of his surroundings, his calculated gait, and the way his eyes scanned without appearing to look—it all screamed one thing: professional.

Worse, the kind of professional who operated outside the underground.

The only people who could pull off that level of blending were the security forces. And if someone like that was sniffing around Sofia, it wasn't by accident.



Luca couldn't risk hacking directly into the man's system—not without risking detection. Instead, he played it safe, piecing together what he could by hopping between lower-level profiles, slowly building a composite of the man's face. Once he had enough data, he ran it against the My Reality database, hoping—praying—that man wasn't who was suspecting to be.

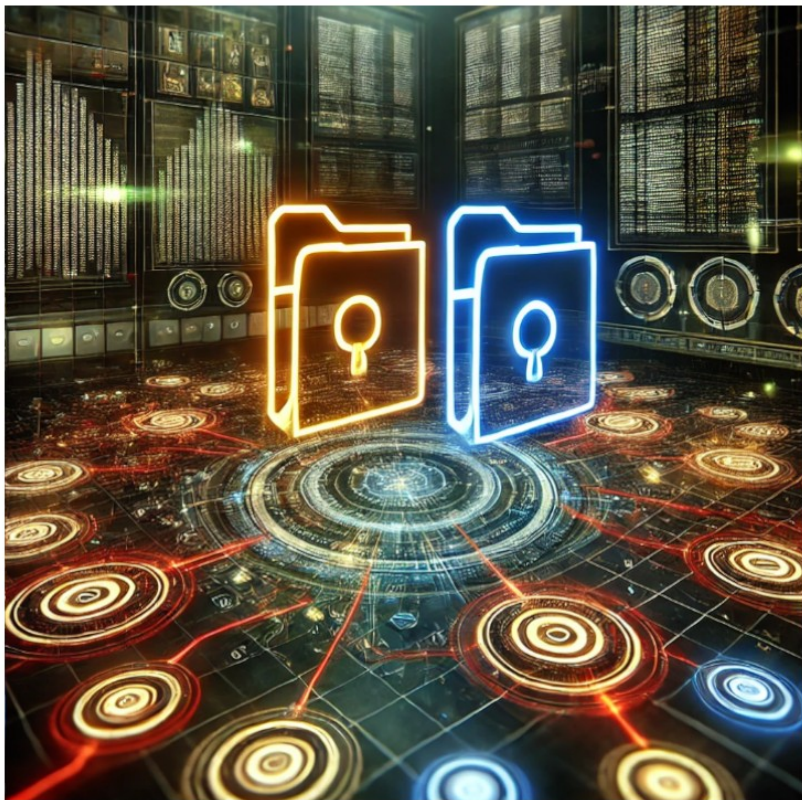
The result hit him like a punch to the gut.

William Davis.

The name was as chilling as the man's reputation. William wasn't just any officer—he was the head of criminal investigations. His clearance level was sky-high, and the microchip embedded in his body made hacking into him impossible. This wasn't just bad. This was catastrophic.

Luca's mind raced as he tried to make sense of it. How had William found Sofia? Was it random, or had something he done tipped him off? Luca doubted William knew about him directly; if he did, Luca would already be sitting in a cold, dark cell. No, William was still in the dark about Luca—but he was far too close.

Luca needed answers. Fast.



He delved into the police records, accessing what he could without triggering alarms. There was no way to see the exact details of William's investigation, but perhaps something in the public reports would provide a clue. Over the last five months, thousands of reports had been filed. Somewhere in that sea of data, there had to be a trace of his mistake.

Methodically, Luca cross-referenced the logs of everyone he had hacked to follow Sofia. Each name was checked against the records of reported anomalies. Two matches appeared.

Two people had reported interruptions in their advertisement feeds.

Luca stared at the screen, disbelief washing over him. How had he missed this? He had spent years perfecting his scripts, polishing the code to anticipate and mask every conceivable side effect of his intrusions. Yet here it was—an oversight as glaring as it was dangerous.

He thought back to the endless hours he'd spent testing, tweaking, and retesting his systems. But no simulation could truly replicate the chaos of the real world. There was always something. Some hidden factor that revealed itself only under real-world conditions. And this time, he'd been lucky—incredibly lucky.



Considering the thousands of feeds he'd hacked during the Sofia operation, the fact that only two people had reported anything was a testament to how much people hated the relentless flood of ads. Most likely, they hadn't even realized something was wrong—they'd simply welcomed the break in the constant spam.

Still, luck could only take him so far.

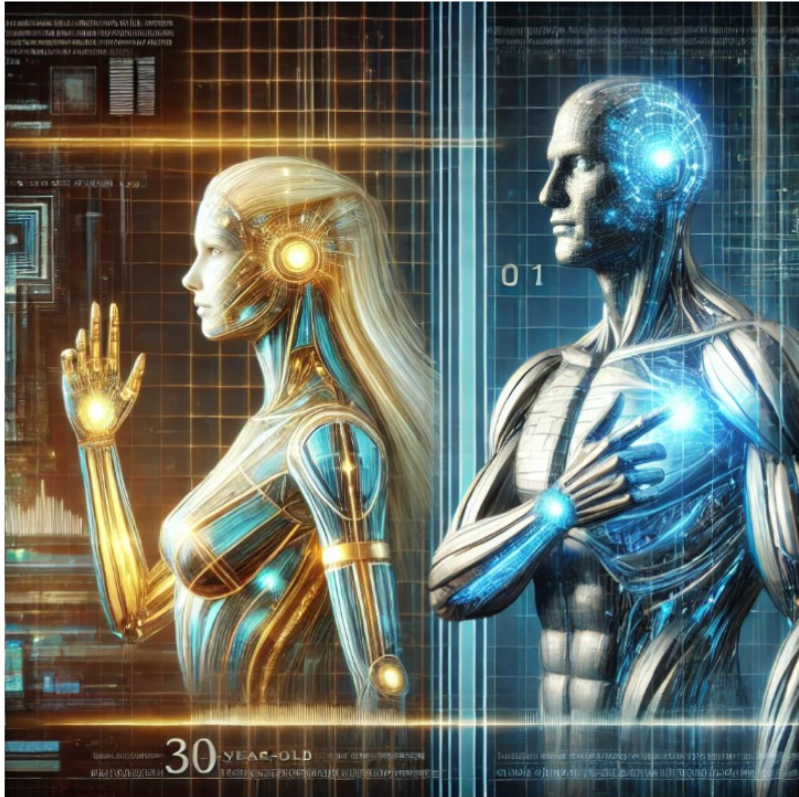
Luca worked quickly to patch the flaw. The issue with stopping the ad feeds was relatively easy to fix. He rewrote the offending lines of code, ensuring that future hacks would go unnoticed, even by those few who missed their ads.

But the damage was done. William Davis wouldn't forget those reports. He was already on the trail, piecing together the anomaly with the precision of a bloodhound. Luca had eliminated one vulnerability, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the net was tightening around him.

His jaw clenched as he stared at the screen, Sofia's profile still open in front of him. The stakes had never been higher. Every step he took now had to be perfect. One more mistake, and it was over.

William was too close.

Luca leaned back in his chair, his mind racing. He'd started this journey to bring down the beast, but now, the beast was staring right back at him.



Now that Luca had patched the issue with the ads, he could safely return to hacking the video feed system. But the problem hadn't gotten any simpler. If anything, his situation had become even more precarious. Contacting Sofia had gone from exceptionally difficult to nearly impossible.

Both Sofia and William carried the impenetrable security microchip, rendering direct hacking out of the question. Luca briefly entertained the idea of hacking into William to force him to abandon his surveillance of Sofia, but the risks were staggering. His scripts were carefully designed as passive listeners, tapping into streams of data without triggering system alerts. Active hacks—altering the system rather than merely observing it—were a far riskier endeavor. The moment he took an active step, he'd be lighting a beacon for every security algorithm in existence.

No, that wasn't an option. Luca needed an indirect approach, one clever enough to draw William's attention elsewhere without exposing himself.



He needed help.

And for that, he needed Henry and the underground.

Luca shut down the hacking session on his computer, his fingers lingering over the keyboard as the familiar hum of his system faded. He terminated the video loop in his contact lenses, the camouflage that allowed him to work undetected. Instantly, the full weight of My Reality's surveillance returned. He was back in the system.

For now, he had to act like a good, law-abiding citizen.

Contacting the underground required physical proximity to one of their hidden access points. Activating his camouflage while moving through the city streets would be suicide. The system constantly cross-referenced location data, and a mismatch between his real-world position and the system's tracking would trigger alarms instantly.

One method to reach the underground discreetly was through a cyber-café—a common and, ironically, ideal cover. These establishments catered to some of society's more private indulgences: augmented reality sex experiences. They allowed users to pair their My Reality feeds with mechanical dolls or even real human sex workers for tailored encounters. The most luxurious dolls, equipped with high-end customization, were priced far beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, making cyber-café a thriving business for offering such services at affordable rates.



Luca entered the cyber-café, the dim neon glow of its signage reflecting off his lenses. The attendant at the front desk barely looked up as he requested a private cabinet. The café was sprawling, a dark, labyrinthine maze housing over a hundred cabinets. Each was soundproofed and unmonitored—extra cameras weren't necessary when everyone's eyes already served as surveillance devices.

Luca was directed to a cabinet near the exit door, his payment already processed through the automated system. Inside, the room was spartan, lit by soft, artificial light. A mechanical doll stood motionless in the corner, its neutral face and generic features designed for anonymity.

He set the doll to its standard five-minute loop, a seamless cycle that would fool My Reality into thinking he was engaged for the full hour he had rented. The system would see nothing out of the ordinary: just another citizen indulging in an everyday fantasy.

After a few minutes, Luca activated his camouflage loop. The system would now replay the fabricated footage of his actions in the cabinet while he moved freely beyond its watchful eyes.

Luca slipped out through the café's backdoor into a dimly lit alley. The air was damp, the faint smell of garbage mingling with the metallic tang of city grime. He glanced around, ensuring he was alone before moving quickly toward the nearby sewer entrance. This alley was rarely traveled, and tonight, it was mercifully empty.



At the sewer grate, Luca crouched low, his movements deliberate as he pulled the cover aside. He dropped into the darkness below, his footsteps echoing faintly as he made his way through the narrow tunnels. Shadows clung to the walls, and the occasional drip of water was the only sound accompanying him.

After a few minutes, he reached a rusted maintenance door, its edges worn with age. From his pocket, Luca retrieved a key—a relic of the old city, long forgotten by the corporate overlords who now ruled the surface. He unlocked the door, revealing a small, hidden chamber.

Inside, he found a concealed panel cleverly disguised as part of the wall. With a practiced motion, he slid it aside, revealing a narrow passage that led into the remnants of the old subway system. The underground's outpost was just beyond.

The outpost hadn't changed much in the nearly three decades since Luca first stepped into its shadowy embrace. The same precarious huts, cobbled together from scavenged metal and wooden panels, lined the narrow paths. The faint hum of stolen electricity powered the community, providing just enough for basic heating and simple stoves to boil water and prepare meager meals. Life here was harsh and unforgiving—but it was free.



Luca wound his way through the settlement, his gaze taking in the familiar sights of resilience and determination. Near the edge of the village, he spotted Henry crouched low, hammering nails into the frame of a new hut. A family was building a larger space in preparation for a newborn on the way—a treasure among the underground people. Children represented hope, the pillars on which the dream of a free world rested.

Henry, once a towering figure of unyielding strength, now moved with the careful precision of someone nearing eighty. Time had weathered him, but it hadn't dulled his spirit. When he caught sight of Luca, he pushed himself to his feet with a small grunt, a warm smile spreading across his lined face.

"So," Henry called out, his tone teasing, "looking for another beating at chess?"

Luca smirked, slipping into their familiar banter. "You bet, old man. You just got lucky last time."

They embraced briefly, the kind of hug shared by two men who had been through more than words could ever convey. As they stepped back, Henry's sharp eyes caught the seriousness in Luca's expression. Without a word, he understood the unspoken weight.



Turning to the family building the hut, Henry waved them off with a kind smile. "I'm taking a little break. Don't worry, I'll be back to help finish up."

The two walked through the winding streets of the underground village, weaving between huts as the community settled into its evening rhythm. The scent of simple meals filled the air, and children lingered in the dim light, kicking an improvised soccer ball despite their parents calling them to supper. It was a fragile peace, a testament to the resilience of those who had chosen freedom over the comforts of the surface world.

After a short walk, they reached Henry's cabin. Like the others, it was modest, its walls patched together with care rather than luxury. Henry had always insisted on living no differently from anyone else. To him, leadership wasn't about privilege—it was about service.

Inside, Henry flicked on the heater, and they sat at the small table in the center of the room. Luca wasted no time, recounting the events of the past few days: his discovery of William Davis, the flaw in his code, and how William had come dangerously close to uncovering him. Henry listened in thoughtful silence, nodding occasionally but never interrupting.



When Luca finished, he leaned back, the weight of the situation clear in his voice. "I need to distract William—get him to turn his attention away from Sofia. But I can't do it through hacking. It's too risky."

Henry rubbed his chin, considering the options. "If we're going to pull him off her trail, we need to give him something he can't ignore. What do you know about the cases he usually takes?"

Luca thought for a moment. "As head of criminal investigations, he has a lot of freedom. He's usually involved in high-profile cases—gruesome murders, major crimes. But lately, he's delegated everything to his team. It's like he's obsessed with Sofia."

Henry's brow furrowed. "Then he knows she's connected to something big. But he's the only one watching her, right? Nobody else in his department?"

"That's right. As far as I can tell, the rest of the department doesn't even know what he's investigating."

Henry nodded slowly. "That means whatever he has isn't strong enough to share with anyone else. He's not ready to go public. If we're going to pull him off, it has to be something substantial. Something he can't ignore."



Luca reached into his bag and pulled out a small folder. "I thought of that. I've been compiling a list of high-profile events—political rallies, corporate galas, anything where our people could stage a distraction."

Henry took the folder, flipping through the pages. As he read, a sly smile crept across his face.

"I think I know just the way to make that inspector run like a rocket."



****Chapter 10: NePO-bAbY smoKE sCReeN****

For Scarlett, today was the day. The culmination of weeks of effort, endless planning, and, in her mind, sacrifices. In just a few minutes, all eyes would be on her. Cameras would flash, the city's elite would sip champagne, and the world—or at least the carefully curated sliver of it that mattered—would witness the unveiling of her revolutionary fashion designs.

She stood in the lavish green room of the city council's main hall, surrounded by racks of opulent garments and a team of assistants who moved with quiet efficiency. Outside, the main room buzzed with anticipation. The city's most powerful figures, including her father, the mayor, had gathered to celebrate the young designer's debut.

For Scarlett, this was destiny. The beginning of her transformation from a talented heiress into a visionary who would change the world.

The presentation would indeed leave its mark on the city. But not in the way Scarlett imagined.

Scarlett thought back to the grueling months that had led her here. Nobody understood how much she had sacrificed for this moment.



When she first conceived of the idea, she had thrown herself into assembling a team to bring her vision to life. It hadn't been easy—nothing worth doing ever was, after all. People lacked her drive, her passion. It baffled her that they couldn't match her energy. Time and again, she'd had to make “difficult” decisions, replacing assistants and team members who didn't rise to her expectations.

Scarlett had worked tirelessly—well, almost tirelessly. She had spent a full day preparing the initial presentation to the city council, seeking funds for her grand project. Her father, as always, had been a pillar of support. She knew he would see how hard she had worked and approve her proposal. He was a fair man, and she was his daughter. How could he not?

Once the funding was secured, Scarlett turned her attention to finding the perfect location for her design studio. The process had been excruciating. Over the course of two stressful weeks, she had toured countless properties, each one failing to meet her exacting standards. But finally, she had found it—a luxurious space in the city's most exclusive district. Nothing less would suffice. Her designs were destined to revolutionize fashion, and her workspace needed to reflect that ambition.

With the studio secured, Scarlett faced the daunting task of assembling a team of master tailors to bring her designs to life. Her schedule was far too demanding to personally vet candidates, so she leaned on her father's extensive network to hire the best. After all, someone with her vision couldn't be bogged down by mundane tasks like recruitment.



Scarlett needed time to find inspiration.

And so, with six weeks remaining until the big presentation, she retreated to the most expensive resort in Honolulu. The lush, sun-soaked paradise was precisely what she needed to recharge and allow her genius to flourish. For two weeks, she immersed herself in luxury, sipping cocktails by the pool and sketching her ideas against the backdrop of pristine ocean views. She deserved this. She had earned it.

When Scarlett returned from her luxurious retreat, she expected nothing less than perfection—and, naturally, that's what she found. The team was already assembled and waiting when she arrived, precisely at 12:00 PM. Without acknowledging their presence, Scarlett strode through the studio's pristine entrance, the click of her designer heels echoing in the silence.

Not a word passed her lips as she headed straight for her private office. After all, what needed to be said? These people should feel privileged to serve her vision, to play even the smallest role in her inevitable rise to greatness.

Inside the glass-walled sanctum of her office, Scarlett spent the next six hours isolated from the team. The designers, tailors, and assistants exchanged uneasy glances, unsure of what was expected of them. The silence was deafening. Without direction, they lingered at their workstations, their uncertainty growing with every passing minute.



At precisely 6:00 PM, Scarlett emerged, holding a stack of hastily drawn sketches in her manicured hands. She summoned the lead tailor, her tone imperious and impatient.

"These are the designs," she announced, shoving the papers into his hands.

The tailor blinked as he glanced at the pages, his stomach sinking. The "designs" were an incomprehensible mess—chaotic, disproportionate scribbles that could have been drawn by a child. None of the forms made sense. Proportions were wildly inaccurate, and the details seemed more like random doodles than actual fashion concepts.

Scarlett's voice cut through his mounting dread. "I expect these completed by tomorrow. No excuses. Make it happen."

The team was stunned, but their hands were tied. In a society that offered workers no rights, they had no choice but to comply. Throughout the night, they worked feverishly, trying to interpret the nonsense Scarlett had handed them. As professionals, they did their best to fill in the gaps, making educated guesses about what she might have intended. They left the pieces unfinished and unsewn, knowing flexibility would be crucial for adjustments—a normal part of the process when working from raw sketches.



But Scarlett didn't care about normal.

She arrived the next morning, fashionably late as always, and immediately demanded to see the progress. What awaited her was a room full of exhausted workers and a collection of half-finished garments.

Her reaction was immediate and explosive.

"What is this?! Are you all completely incompetent?!" she shrieked, her voice echoing off the studio's high ceilings. Her face twisted in fury as she pointed at the incomplete garments. "Do you call this work? Do you call this effort? It's garbage! Absolute garbage!"

The team stood frozen, their heads bowed as she continued her tirade. Scarlett didn't understand—or care—that the unfinished state of the pieces was intentional. To her, it was proof of their laziness, their utter failure to grasp her genius.

"I give you a simple task," she ranted, "and you can't even do that! You're all useless! Useless!"

Her insults grew sharper, more personal, cutting through the air like daggers. When her fury reached its peak, she turned to the lead tailor with an icy glare.



"You want an example of what happens when you fail me? Fine. A third of you are gone. Pack your things. Now."

The workers exchanged desperate, silent glances, but no one dared to protest. In this society, they had no protections, no recourse. They were disposable, and Scarlett knew it.

With a final, dismissive wave, Scarlett stormed out of the room. "I expect everything to be perfect tomorrow. No excuses. If you can't deliver, you're all gone."

The remaining team members stared at the unfinished garments, their shoulders heavy with defeat. For them, there was no choice but to keep working—no matter how impossible her demands.

That night, despite their exhaustion, the team worked tirelessly to sew the models from Scarlett's chaotic sketches. The designs were riddled with flaws, each one more impractical than the last, but the team pushed forward. Knowing Scarlett's volatile temperament, they also prepared alternative versions—pieces that incorporated their own expertise and creativity, hoping to salvage the presentation. It was their second sleepless night in a row, but their dedication resulted in extraordinary craftsmanship, even if their spirits were all but crushed.



By the time Scarlett arrived the next afternoon, the atmosphere in the studio was tense. Her entrance was as dramatic as ever, her heels clicking sharply against the polished floors. The team braced themselves as she began inspecting their work.

Her face betrayed a range of emotions as she moved between the finished garments. A concentrated frown twisted her features, occasionally giving way to slight gestures of disgust. Despite her self-absorption, even Scarlett wasn't foolish enough to overlook the effort it had taken to produce the pieces in front of her. She offered faint, begrudging approval for several of the dresses, pointing at them with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"These will do," she muttered, barely audible, before turning her attention to the rest.

Her expression darkened as she gestured at the alternatives the team had created. "Burn these," she ordered flatly. Although Scarlett didn't care for them, she believed that someone out there could make millions from something that originated from her, even without her approval.

Over the next month, the workflow settled into a brutal rhythm. The team toiled late into the nights and over weekends, stitching Scarlett's outlandish concepts into reality. While they were spared complete collapse by finally being allowed adequate sleep, the relentless schedule pushed them to their limits. Their lives revolved entirely around Scarlett's demands, leaving no room for respite or personal time.



By the end of the month, the team had completed 40 dresses—an impressive feat considering the abysmal starting point they had been given. Each design had been painstakingly refined from Scarlett’s initial sketches, most of which bore the haphazard marks of someone who had spent less than an hour scribbling on paper.

Scarlett, however, saw no problem with this imbalance. To her, that hour of work was worth more than millions of hours spent by others. Her talent, in her mind, was a priceless gift to the world—a gift that deserved to be carried by the sweat and labor of those beneath her.

For the team, it was a bitter truth they had no choice but to endure.

Scarlett stood backstage, her perfectly manicured fingers clutching a copy of the speech she was about to deliver. The teleprompter would guide her through every word, but she couldn’t help glancing over the script one last time. Her father, ever the pragmatist, had hired one of Hollywood’s finest screenwriters to craft the speech—a concise, five-minute masterpiece of accessible, catchy phrases. Short sentences, simple words, nothing that would trip her up.



He had made it clear to the screenwriter: "Make it easy for her to understand." Scarlett never took offense at such comments. Why should she? The details didn't matter. She was a visionary, not a technician.

The main hall of the city council was packed to capacity, the air buzzing with anticipation. This wasn't just any audience; it was the elite of the country, the movers and shakers of business, politics, and culture. Each one of them had come to witness the unveiling of Scarlett's so-called "revolution in fashion."

Outside the hall, reporters jostled for position, their cameras poised to broadcast the event live to millions. Inside, trays of delicacies crafted by the nation's finest chefs floated through the crowd, carried by a small army of waiters. The scent of truffle oil, aged wines, and decadent desserts lingered in the air. Everything was perfect.

Scarlett's gaze wandered briefly to the two waiters standing near the podium. They were holding large, empty trays and seemed oddly stationary compared to their bustling peers. But Scarlett dismissed them without a second thought. It wasn't her job to worry about the details. This event was under the watchful eye of the world's best security forces. What could possibly go wrong?



Her moment had arrived.

Scarlett stepped up to the podium, the dazzling lights of the cameras illuminating her flawless makeup and meticulously styled hair. The live streams began rolling, and the room fell silent, save for the faint hum of anticipation. This was it. The moment she would change the world.

She smiled radiantly, adjusted the microphone, and began.

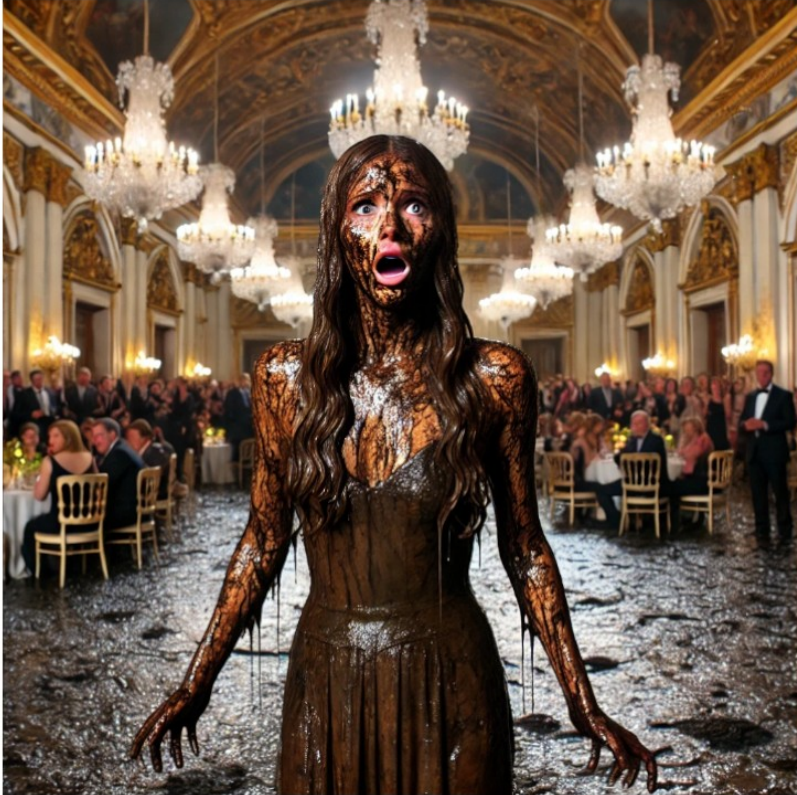
"Welcome, everyone, to the fashion revolution the world has been waiting for."

And then, it happened.

The two waiters flanking the podium suddenly moved in unison, their trays tilting upward. For a brief moment, the room was filled with an unexpected explosion of color as a cloud of confetti rained down over Scarlett.

The crowd gasped, but Scarlett was unfazed. Instead, she began jumping in place, clapping her hands and smiling as tears streamed down her face. To the viewers at home, it seemed as though this was all part of an elaborate performance.

For a solid minute, she reveled in the unexpected "celebration," her joy infectious enough to elicit some hesitant applause from the audience. But as time dragged on, a murmur began to ripple through the room. Something was off.



Concerned whispers filled the hall. A few attendees moved closer to Scarlett, their faces etched with confusion. "Are you alright?" one of them asked, but she didn't respond. She continued jumping and smiling, her movements robotic, her expression frozen.

Then, abruptly, the scene shifted.

The vibrant confetti clinging to Scarlett's designer gown seemed to darken, transforming into something foul. The glimmering spectacle turned into streaks of gray and brown sludge.

Gasps of horror erupted as the realization hit. Scarlett wasn't covered in confetti—she was drenched in sewage.

The stench hit next, unmistakable and revolting. Scarlett's face, once radiant with joy, contorted into sheer terror. Tears of happiness were replaced with tears of horror as she stared down at her hands, her gown, her entire body, now slick with filth. Streams of sludge dripped from her hair, slithering down her face in nauseating trails.

Screams erupted in the crowd.

Security forces sprang into action, alarms blaring as the automated doors of the city council slammed shut. Attendees scrambled for safety, shielding their noses and mouths from the overwhelming stench.



But it was too late.

The two waiters who had orchestrated the spectacle were already gone, having slipped away unnoticed during the initial chaos. They had left no trace but the overwhelming evidence dripping from Scarlett's ruined dress.

William's phone buzzed with an urgent call just as he was preparing to resume his surveillance. He sat near the window of his rented apartment, his eyes fixed on Sofia's building, waiting for her to begin her usual walk through the park. She was minutes away from stepping outside when the call came through.

The voice on the other end left no room for negotiation: the mayor himself demanded William's presence immediately.

The weight of the summons sank into William's chest. Ignoring the mayor wasn't an option. The man wasn't just the city's political leader; he was a powerful figure on Reality Labs' executive board. Defying such authority wasn't just career suicide—it was dangerous.

William pulled up the system feed on his terminal, quickly reviewing the incident at the city council hall. The footage was chaotic and damning. He watched as the waiters threw what appeared to be confetti over Scarlett. At first, it seemed like an innocuous—if absurd—stunt. But then the illusion shattered, replaced by the grim, undeniable truth. The confetti wasn't confetti at all.



By the time the sewage began dripping from Scarlett's ruined gown, William's instincts were screaming. This wasn't just a prank—it was a calculated, humiliating attack. And whoever was behind it wasn't sloppy. They had timed the reveal perfectly to capture the attention of the entire world.

As William continued watching, unease settled deep in his gut. This was the type of hacking attack he had been investigating over the last months, but something about this act didn't fit the pattern he had been tracking.

So far, the culprits—whoever they were—had flown under the radar. Even the murder of Allison, while tragic, had been handled as an isolated incident, barely making headlines. Reality Labs had seen to that. Such murders weren't unheard of; overworked employees snapping under corporate pressure was an unpleasant but accepted reality.

But this? This attack had thrust the system's failures into the global spotlight. Every media outlet was broadcasting the footage, dissecting it frame by frame. This wasn't staying under the radar. This was a message.

William's instincts whispered another possibility: a distraction.

His jaw tightened. If this was meant to divert his attention, it was working. He couldn't ignore the mayor's summons, but leaving Sofia unmonitored for even a moment felt like playing into someone's hands.



He didn't have a choice. He needed someone he could trust—not for their integrity, but for their willingness to operate outside the system's watchful eye. Someone who wouldn't hesitate to handle the task off-the-books.

He dialed a number and waited.

"Cole," he began as the line connected. "We've got a task that needs handling. Surveillance on a subject named Sofia Carter—basic procedure, nothing complicated."

Cole's irritation was immediate. "Surveillance? What for? I've got enough on my plate, William. Can't you find someone else?"

William exhaled slowly, carefully calibrating his response. The system monitored everything. Conversations had to be precise. He shifted the tone subtly, invoking a code the police forces had quietly developed to evade surveillance.

"This falls under standard procedure B5," he said, emphasizing the code.

There was a pause. Cole's tone shifted, the irritation giving way to curiosity. "B5, huh? And how are the reports being filed?"



William replied evenly, "Administrative system type C."

The silence on the other end lingered just long enough to confirm Cole understood. A "B5" operation meant this was unofficial, a covert task outside the system's purview. "Type C" meant there would be no formal documentation—only discreet payment for a job done in the shadows.

"Alright," Cole said at last, his tone now devoid of protest. "I'll take care of it. You'll get what you need."

William ended the call, his hand lingering on the phone as he stared back out the window. Sofia's silhouette appeared briefly, pausing by the curtains before disappearing again. His instincts gnawed at him.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched—that they knew he was onto them.

Thomas Cole was a man of blunt precision. Rough around the edges, with a temperament that leaned toward aggression, he wasn't the kind of officer you'd describe as diplomatic. But when he accepted an order, he followed it to the letter, no deviations, no questions. That's why people like William trusted him for the dirty jobs.



Twenty minutes after William's call, Cole met him near Sofia's apartment. He didn't need much of an explanation to know why William was under pressure. Cole had caught the tail end of the now-infamous live stream, thanks to his wife calling him over to see the spectacle. Watching one of the most entitled public figures in the city drenched in filth was the highlight of his week. The brief glimpse of Scarlett's humiliation had been worth every second.

William laid out the task: simple surveillance. Keep a watch on Sofia, record her actions, and pay close attention to anyone she contacted or interacted with.

It wasn't complicated, but Cole knew better than to underestimate a job. If William was pulling strings to assign this off-the-books, there was something deeper going on. Still, Cole didn't ask questions. Extra money was extra money.

Sofia left her apartment just as William finished briefing him. Without wasting a moment, Cole began tailing her. He kept his distance, slipping into the role of an unnoticed observer with the ease of someone who had been doing it for nearly three decades.



Surveillance was Cole's specialty. Over the years, he had honed the art of blending into his surroundings, maintaining just the right amount of distance to avoid detection. As Sofia moved through the city's late-afternoon streets, he adjusted his pace, staying close enough to see her but far enough to avoid suspicion.

The streets were beginning to empty, most people retreating to their homes to lose themselves in soap operas, sports games, or their preferred digital addictions. By the time Sofia entered the park, the crowds had thinned considerably.

The park was well-lit, its artificial ambiance casting soft glows across the pathways and the surface of a small, serene lake. It was the kind of place people came to escape the monotony of their lives—quiet, picturesque, and safe. With My Reality always active, the odds of any crime going unnoticed were slim to none. Criminals had long learned to avoid such areas.

Sofia strolled leisurely, her movements unhurried. After a few minutes, she stopped by a bench near the lake. Sitting down, she drew out a large book and began to read.

Cole settled into a comfortable rhythm, keeping his distance while keeping her in view. For the next hour, Sofia barely moved, her attention fixed on the book. She turned the pages at a steady pace, seemingly absorbed in its contents. At first glance, it was an easy assignment—a little too easy.



But something gnawed at Cole.

He couldn't pinpoint it, but something about the scene felt... off. His sharp instincts, honed through years of fieldwork, began to nag at him. Sofia was turning pages normally, one after the other, but the book seemed enormous—far larger than anything a casual reader would bring for a leisurely stroll. Despite her consistent pace, it didn't look like she was making any progress through the volume.

It was a subtle thing, and Cole couldn't quite explain why it bothered him. Everything seemed normal, at least on the surface. The My Reality feed displayed the scene with the same clarity as always, its filters augmenting reality without gaps or anomalies. Yet, the unease remained.

Still, he stayed focused, doing what he did best: watching. No detail escaped him, his sharp eyes following every movement Sofia made. Whatever the odd feeling was, Cole dismissed it as just another quirk of the job. For now, it was easy money.

Once Luca confirmed that the police officer surveilling Sofia was seeing the carefully crafted loop of her reading on the bench, he knew it was time to act. Everything had unfolded according to plan so far, even with William's backup officer now in play.



Luca and Henry had anticipated this possibility. They knew William, even while operating unofficially, had the resources to escalate the situation. That's why they had prepared for contingencies.

Fortunately, Thomas Cole didn't have the security microchip that made hacking into William's systems impossible. With Cole's vulnerabilities, Luca was able to execute his plan. He had captured a convincing loop of Sofia sitting and reading, complete with an unchanging scene surrounding her. By hacking into Cole's contact lenses, Luca fed the officer the loop, effectively freezing Sofia's apparent actions in Cole's augmented reality feed. The illusion extended beyond Sofia herself, replacing the entire area around the bench to ensure Luca could approach undetected.

For six months, Luca had observed Sofia carefully. He knew her routines, her habits, and, more importantly, her temperament. She was no fool—an intelligent, calm individual who handled tense situations with grace. He had watched her resolve conflicts among students with a rare mix of empathy and authority, always seeking a solution that worked for everyone.

Luca also knew that deception wouldn't work. Someone as perceptive as Sofia would see through a lie immediately. He needed to approach her with the truth, but the situation's danger meant he couldn't afford to let her flee. Everything hinged on her staying put.



Steeling himself, Luca moved silently behind her, every step precise and deliberate. As he approached, he played his first card.

"Sofia," he said, his voice low but firm, "I know you can turn off your contact lenses completely. I know you're off the system right now. Please, stay still unless you want to lose that privilege."

The words hit Sofia like a lightning bolt. She froze, her mind racing, alarm coursing through her veins.

Luca pressed on, his tone softening slightly to reassure her. "Even if you don't believe me, I want to assure you that I mean no harm." He paused briefly, watching her. She remained frozen, her sharp mind likely weighing her options. He added, "Now, I'm going to sit next to you and explain myself. Please, understand that if you run, you could lose everything. I need you to confirm that you understand."

Sofia's voice trembled, but it carried a thread of confidence, her willpower keeping her fear at bay. "...I understand," she said, barely audible.

Luca circled the bench slowly and sat beside her, maintaining a careful distance. Sofia's body was tense, her eyes fixed on the lake as if searching for an escape.



"I'm really sorry we have to meet under these circumstances," Luca began, his tone genuinely apologetic.

Sofia said nothing, her fear tightly controlled but still visible in the way her hands gripped the book in her lap.

"My name is Luca," he continued. "And right now, I'm also off the system. The system cannot hear or see us, as long as we stay seated on this bench."

Her eyes widened slightly at his words. The ability to completely disable the system was reserved for the most powerful corporate executives, a privilege granted only to a select few. That she still had access to this feature was an anomaly—a remnant of some powerful intervention in her favor.

But Luca's claim that he, too, was off the system was harder to believe. How could someone outside the corporate elite achieve such a feat? She remained silent, her mind racing to reconcile this unexpected encounter with the reality she had always known.

Luca studied her carefully. She wasn't panicking; instead, she seemed to be calculating, weighing the truth of his words against the risk of her situation. That was good. It meant she was listening.



The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken tension. Luca knew the next words he spoke would determine whether Sofia stayed to hear him out—or if everything they had planned would fall apart.

"Yeah, it's a hard thing to accept," Luca said, his voice steady but tinged with gravity. "That's why I need to say this—to prove it to you. Something that, in fact, is the absolute truth."

He took a deep breath, his eyes locking with hers. The weight of his next words hung in the air like a storm about to break.

"I'm going to take down Reality Labs. I will destroy the My Reality app. Everyone will be free..." He paused, letting the enormity of his statement sink in before finishing. "And you're going to help me."

Sofia's reaction was immediate and visceral. She shot to her feet. Her hands trembled as she clutched the book to her chest, her face pale with terror.

"What—" she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper, as her gaze darted around the park. Any moment now, the security forces would descend upon them. The weight of Luca's words felt like a noose tightening around her neck.



Her breathing quickened, her chest heaving with panic. Running seemed futile, but her instincts screamed at her to move, to flee. Yet, somehow, she didn't. Some deeply buried sense of logic, or perhaps sheer survival instinct, forced her trembling body to sit back down.

Her mind spiraled with fear, her heart pounding uncontrollably as tears welled in her eyes. This is it, she thought. This is the end.

The seconds dragged on, each one feeling like an eternity.

One minute, two, three... Sofia sat frozen, every sound in the park amplified in her heightened state of terror.

Four minutes, five, six... Her eyes darted to the shadows, waiting for security forces to burst out, waiting for the inevitable.

Seven minutes, eight, nine... Luca sat silently beside her, his face etched with quiet sorrow, his presence both unnerving and oddly grounding.

Ten minutes, eleven, twelve... Slowly, doubt began to creep into Sofia's mind. The system's response to such a blatant threat should have been immediate—a helicopter roaring overhead, boots hitting the ground. But nothing happened.



Thirteen minutes. Fourteen. Fifteen... Sofia's breathing began to slow, her mind racing to reassess. Could Luca really be telling the truth? If the system hadn't responded, did that mean they truly were off the grid?

Her tears slowed, her terror ebbing into a strange, exhausted calm. She glanced at Luca, who sat quietly, his posture apologetic.

"I'm really sorry to have put you through that," he said, his voice soft but sincere. "Believe me, I didn't have a choice. Please... I beg you. Give me a chance to explain."

Sofia's voice was still trembling, but it carried a new edge of cold resolve. "Do I have a choice?"

Luca met her gaze. "Yes, you do. But that choice could mean losing the only opportunity we have to end this nightmare of a society. And I know," he added, his tone firm, "that you hate this society as much as I do."

Sofia looked away, her eyes drifting to the darkening sky. The first stars were beginning to emerge, faint against the fading glow of the horizon. Her body ached with residual tension, and her mind struggled to reconcile the events of the last few minutes.



She didn't accept Luca's extreme actions—not yet. But she understood them. In a world as broken as theirs, desperation could drive people to extraordinary lengths.

Finally, she spoke, her voice quieter but steady. "I'm listening."

After an hour of watching Sofia sit on the bench and read what seemed like an endless book, Thomas Cole observed her stand up and leave the park. The session had been uneventful—apart from that faint, nagging sensation that something was slightly off.

Still, Sofia's behavior had been outwardly normal. Cole had done his job, meticulously recording the feed for William to analyze later. If there was something hidden in the details, it wasn't Cole's problem to uncover it. His role was to watch and record, not to interpret. That was someone else's responsibility.

As he tailed Sofia on her way back to her apartment, Cole began to notice subtle changes in her demeanor. At the park, she had seemed relaxed, her body language loose and unguarded. But now, there was something different.



To an untrained eye, her movements might still appear calm, but Cole had spent decades reading people. He could tell when someone was faking composure. Sofia's pace was steady, her gaze forward, but there was tension in the set of her shoulders, a rigidity that hadn't been there before.

She was hiding something.

The thought sent a ripple of curiosity through Cole. He scanned the surroundings as they walked, his eyes darting over every alley, doorway, and passerby, looking for any sign of a clandestine exchange. A nod, a glance, even the smallest gesture could betray a meeting. But there was nothing.

Sofia entered her apartment building without incident, disappearing behind the door as it clicked shut.

Cole lingered outside for a moment, his instincts chewing at him. Something had happened in that park—he was pretty sure of it. But whatever it was, it had left no visible trace. No contacts, no signals, no tangible evidence. He'd tell William everything when he returned from his meeting with the mayor. It was William's job to dissect the footage and make sense of it. Cole's task was complete.



As he walked back toward his car, Cole allowed himself a small, satisfied grin. He had done the job with precision, exactly as instructed, and the extra cash from this off-the-books gig was already earmarked for a little indulgence. He thought about the whiskey he'd been eyeing at the corner shop and how it would taste tonight.

For Cole, this was just another job well done.



****Chapter 11: Do I want a normal life?***

Sofia was still trembling when she stepped into her apartment, the familiar space offering little comfort. She leaned against the door, her chest rising and falling with deep, uneven breaths. The terror she had felt in the park lingered, raw and consuming, refusing to dissipate.

She moved to the kitchen on autopilot, her hands fumbling as she prepared a cup of hot tea. The routine was meant to soothe her, the warm liquid calming the trembling in her body. But as she sat at the small table, cradling the mug in her hands, her thoughts raced.

"My usual routine..." she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. Would she ever be able to go back to it?

For years, Sofia had crafted a life of quiet contentment. She taught a subject she loved, reveling in the opportunity to share her passion with eager students. Her apartment, modest but comfortable, was one of the few places she could see as it truly was—a rare privilege in a society built on augmented illusions.

She didn't have many friends, and no one particularly close, but she was fine with that. She valued her solitude, her walks in the park, her books. In those quiet moments, she believed she had found what she was looking for: peace.



And yet, there was a part of her existence that never quite settled into that idyllic reality. A shadow lingered in the corners of her soul, restless and unyielding. It whispered to her, reminding her of truths she tried to bury. The hunger to escape the system, to fight it, had never fully disappeared.

No matter how hard she tried to suppress it, it remained—a flickering ember refusing to be extinguished.

Sofia's childhood had been anything but peaceful. It was marked by tragedy, fear, and the kind of scars that never truly fade.

She was seven years old when she witnessed the execution of her parents. The memory was etched into her mind in horrifying clarity: their lifeless bodies crumpling to the ground, the cold eyes of the officers who had carried out the act.

Her parents had been professors at the very college where she now worked. They were passionate, principled people who believed in a better future—a future free from the suffocating grip of the system. But their defiance came at a cost.

In secret, her parents had organized meetings among a small group of trusted colleagues, all equally disillusioned with the corporate regime. They had developed a clever system to communicate their dissent. Sofia's mother, a psychologist, and her father, a linguist, had devised an intricate code using visual cues that only made sense within the context of the college.



To any outsider reviewing the surveillance footage from their contact lenses, the meetings seemed innocuous—discussions about improving college facilities or enhancing academic programs. But to the initiated, the words carried hidden meanings, a quiet rebellion woven into their conversations.

Her parents were careful, almost obsessively so. Only those who had worked at the college for years, who had demonstrated genuine empathy and altruism, were invited to join. Sofia's mother had even created a covert psychological test to vet potential members—a subtle assessment designed to weed out infiltrators and detect false kindness.

The system worked well, uncovering those who feigned trustworthiness. But no test was infallible.

One day, the fire they had been playing with consumed them. Someone they trusted—someone they had welcomed into their circle—had betrayed them. The authorities descended on them with swift, merciless efficiency.

Sofia had been hiding in a storage closet when it happened, peeking through a sliver in the door as her parents were dragged into the courtyard. She had clamped her hands over her mouth to stifle her cries, but the image of her parents' execution burned into her memory. Their fight for a better future ended in blood and silence, leaving Sofia alone in a world that punished those who dared to dream.



The betrayal came from someone they trusted—Gianna Davis. A third-year psychology student at the time, Gianna had seemed like the perfect addition to their clandestine meetings. She had a sterling reputation, built on years of volunteering in social programs and aiding those in need.

Gianna had passed the psychological test with flying colors, her responses reflecting an impeccable understanding of empathy and compassion. But Gianna's brilliance masked a terrifying truth: she was a fully functional psychopath. Her extraordinary intelligence had allowed her to mimic empathy with such precision that no one suspected a thing. She was incapable of genuine human connection, but she knew exactly how to fake it.

The betrayal came swiftly and without warning. Sofia's parents had invited her to her first meeting, a quiet gathering where ideas were exchanged under the veil of coded language. But that had been enough for Gianna to report them to the authorities.

That night, as Sofia lay in bed, the world she knew was torn apart.

The police breached their home with ruthless efficiency. Officers stormed the house, their faces cold and impassive as they read out the charges. The sentence, they declared, had already been handed down. There would be no trial, no chance for defense.



Sofia's parents didn't resist; they simply stood tall, holding each other's hands as they were led into the living room. The officers showed no hesitation. Raising their semi-automatic weapons, they unleashed a hail of bullets, executing Sofia's parents in front of her.

Sofia's screams echoed through the house, her small body trembling as she cowered in the corner. But her horror was magnified by the officers' twisted smiles. They were enjoying it—the act of ending two lives in cold blood.

Something inside Sofia shattered that night. A part of her that had once been whole—innocent—was irreparably broken.

For two years, Sofia didn't utter a single word.

The media painted her parents as dangerous radicals, enemies of the state who sought to destroy the fabric of their "perfect" society. Sofia, now an orphan, became a cautionary tale, a living symbol of what awaited the children of dissenters.

She was sent to one of the city's harshest orphanages, a place where cruelty was policy. The food was barely edible, the rooms cold and unwelcoming, and the strict religious staff saw punishment as a form of salvation. The orphanage used Sofia as an example, a constant reminder of the dangers of deviating from the system's approved message.



But none of this compared to the torment in Sofia's own mind.

For two years, she was trapped in a relentless loop of horror and hate. Every night, she relived the execution, the sight of her parents' lifeless bodies, the smug satisfaction on the officers' faces. The loop consumed her, feeding her anger, her grief, and her despair.

She hated everything.

She hated her parents for their defiance, for risking everything for their ideals. She hated them for leaving her alone, for dooming her to the orphanage. She hated herself for surviving. But above all, she hated the police—the monsters who had taken her parents from her with such callous joy.

It took years for her to claw her way out of the mental prison she had built. No one came to save her; no hand reached out to pull her from the darkness. She realized, painfully and slowly, that if she wanted to survive, she would have to save herself.

Sofia emerged from her silence with a new resolve. She would not follow in her parents' footsteps. She would not fight the system, would not sacrifice herself for ideals that couldn't protect her.



She decided to adapt, to blend in, to embrace the system as much as she needed to in order to live a quiet, simple life. She buried her anger, her hatred, and her pain, locking them away in the darkest corners of her mind.

Sofia threw herself into her studies with single-minded determination. The orphanage offered few opportunities, but she seized every one with an intensity that set her apart from her peers. While the other children accepted their bleak reality, Sofia focused on building a future, using knowledge as her shield and weapon.

Her relentless effort paid off. By the time she graduated, she had earned the highest history scores in the country, a distinction that opened a door to a prestigious scholarship. When the opportunity came, she didn't hesitate. She walked through that door with resolve, determined never to look back.

At university, Sofia found her calling in a niche but growing field: the history of technological evolution. It was an area few had ventured into, making it a perfect avenue for someone like Sofia—ambitious, intelligent, and wary of drawing too much attention. Specializing in this field allowed her to delve deeply into the system's inner workings under the guise of historical research.



Her interest wasn't purely academic. Every paper, every study, every archived document brought her closer to understanding the system that had taken everything from her. She didn't seek revenge; she sought survival. If she understood the system better than anyone, she could avoid her parents' fate.

Her dedication didn't go unnoticed. Sofia excelled so thoroughly in her work that she gained access to the most sensitive documents related to technological history. To her astonishment, it seemed that someone high up in the corporate hierarchy had taken an interest in preserving the narrative of technological progress.

They wanted history to remember the system's advancements as noble and necessary. And Sofia delivered exactly what they wanted.

She became a master at weaving the corporate-approved story into her research, presenting the evolution of technology as an unequivocal good. Her work was flawless, so perfectly aligned with the system's messaging that those in power grew to trust her implicitly. So much so that they overlooked the extraordinary gift they had given her.

Sofia was granted a privilege few human beings ever received: the ability to completely disconnect from the system by turning off her contact lenses. It was an oversight, a remnant of her high-level access, but she had learned early on not to draw attention to it.



She used the gift sparingly and with great caution. Only when she was utterly alone—inside her apartment or walking in the park—did she dare to disconnect.

Without the system's filters, the world took on a raw, unfiltered beauty. The synthetic, hyper-saturated colors of augmented reality gave way to the muted, authentic tones of the real world. She loved the quiet imperfection of nature as it truly was: the rough bark of trees, the uneven patches of grass, the dimming sky as dusk fell.

But Sofia knew this privilege was precarious. One wrong move could bring it all crashing down. She guarded it jealously, hiding it even from herself sometimes, as though acknowledging it too often might make it disappear.

By all appearances, Sofia had achieved the life she had long desired. She had a fulfilling career, a quiet home, and moments of stolen peace in the real world. She had adapted to the system, played her part perfectly, and built a life far removed from the chaos of her childhood.

Yet, deep within her soul, the embers of her hatred for the system still smoldered. She had buried them, convinced herself they no longer burned.



But now, for the first time in twenty years, that hatred surged to the forefront.

Luca's words, his audacity, had cracked something open inside her. The world she had carefully constructed suddenly felt fragile, and the raw truth she had suppressed for decades pressed against the walls of her mind.

The system hadn't changed. It was still the same machine that had devoured her parents. The same machine she had spent her life learning to outmaneuver.

And for the first time, Sofia felt the pull of something she thought she had left behind: the urge to fight back.

Sofia stood up from the couch, the cup of tea warm in her hands, and walked to the window. Her mind churned with Luca's words, his revelation about the police surveillance that shadowed her every move. The thought of being a target sickened her, a bitter wave of nausea rolling through her. She had worked so hard—so carefully—to avoid this exact fate.

She stared out at the quiet street below, her reflection faintly visible in the glass. The police officer could be anywhere, blending into the shadows or feigning casual disinterest in the crowd. The system was always watching. Always ready to chew up anyone, good or bad.



Sofia understood this harsh truth all too well. The same meticulous path she had walked to become the perfect citizen, to blend into the system, had also painted a target on her back. There was no escaping it. The system would always be there, omnipresent and hungry, devouring anyone who strayed too far from its script.

Her fingers tightened around the cup, but she didn't close the curtains. A simple act of caution like that could trigger unwanted suspicion. She knew better. She had to keep playing her role—the part of the compliant, upstanding citizen who had nothing to hide.

But as she stood there, staring into the dimly lit street, she felt something stirring inside her. Something unfamiliar, yet achingly powerful. Was it... hope?

Luca's words had awakened more than just her simmering hatred for the system. They had sparked the faintest glimmer of possibility.

Sofia had always known about the people living outside the system. In those terrible days after her parents' execution, she had imagined joining them, leaving everything behind. Rumors about the underground had reached her ears, whispers of communities untouched by the surgical implants, where people lived free from the system's oppressive gaze.



Those born into the underground were spared the contact lens procedure, their freedom protected from birth. But there were also those who had once been part of the system—people who had chosen to remove their lenses.

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. Removing the implants often came at a steep price: blindness, irreversible damage, even death. Yet some had survived, their sight intact, emerging as true rebels in a world of submission.

Sofia had never had the courage to take that step, even in her darkest moments. She couldn't bear the risk, the pain, the unknown. But that didn't stop the pang of envy she felt for those who had. They didn't have to act, didn't have to perform for a society that demanded perfection while delivering none of it.

That night, sleep evaded her. She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, her thoughts a relentless tide pulling her in different directions.

The internal struggle she had buried for years refused to stay hidden. It had stepped forward, louder and more urgent than ever. But now, it wasn't just anger and grief that filled her. There were new elements in the mix—new factors she couldn't ignore.



She wasn't alone anymore. Luca's presence, his words, had shifted something fundamental in her understanding of the world. And he had spoken of payback.

The idea took root, unbidden but powerful. For years, she had fought to keep her hatred contained, to smother the fire before it consumed her. But now, that fire burned brighter than ever.

What if she could fight back? What if she could wipe away the smug smiles of the officers who had killed her parents? What if she could stop others from enduring the same pain, the same loss?

Her heart pounded as the thoughts grew louder, more insistent. The system had taken everything from her. It was time to take something back.

That night, Sofia didn't sleep. But for the first time in years, she began to dream.

Sofia arrived at the meeting point, her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and determination. She had followed Luca's instructions to the letter, ensuring no one could track her movements. As she stepped into the shadowed alleyway, she paused, scanning her surroundings. Satisfied that no eyes were on her, she took a deep breath and disconnected her contact lenses. The world shifted immediately, the vibrant overlays and synthetic colors vanishing to reveal the raw, unfiltered reality beneath.



The faint stench of the sewer hit her as she descended, but she pressed on. This was her choice, and there was no turning back.

Luca was waiting for her near the maintenance door, his figure barely illuminated by a flickering overhead light. He nodded silently as she approached, then gestured for her to follow him.

Still wordless, he led her into the maintenance room. Once inside, he removed a panel in the wall, revealing a narrow passage. He gestured for her to crawl through, and she hesitated only briefly before following.

When they emerged on the other side, Luca finally spoke, his tone soft but sincere.

"I really want to thank you for giving us this chance," he said, extending a hand to help her up.

Sofia accepted the gesture but remained silent, her body tense, her mind wary.

They walked in silence through a dimly lit corridor, the sound of their footsteps echoing faintly against the damp walls. Sofia's unease grew with every step, but she kept moving forward, drawn by a mix of curiosity and the desire to see what lay beyond.



When they finally reached the underground village, Sofia stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening at the sight before her.

At the entrance stood a man with a warm, weathered face. His demeanor was calm, his presence grounding. He greeted her with a gentle smile, clearly trying to put her at ease.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sofia," he said, his voice kind and measured. "You don't know how much it means to us that you've come here."

Sofia acknowledged his welcome with a small nod, her shyness still evident.

The man—Henry, she guessed—seemed to sense her apprehension. He added quickly, "Please, don't be afraid. I know what they say about us. We aren't monsters. We just want to live in peace... well, except for what this terrible genius boy here has inspired us to do," he said, chuckling softly as he gestured to Luca.

Luca blushed, looking down in embarrassment, but didn't protest.

Henry extended his arm toward the village. "Allow me to introduce our community."



Under Henry and Luca's guidance, Sofia began to explore the underground society.

For the first time in her life, she saw people living without the shadow of the system looming over them. The narrow streets were lined with simple huts constructed from salvaged wood and metal, their modesty a stark contrast to the opulence of the world above. Children played freely, their laughter echoing in the cavernous space. Adults moved with purpose, but without the tension that came from constant surveillance.

Sofia's eyes lingered on the families, the pure, unfiltered love between parents and their children. It struck her how different this was from the hollow, staged interactions she had seen through the augmented reality filters above. Here, happiness wasn't projected or fabricated; it was real.

Little by little, Sofia began to relax. The tension in her shoulders eased, and she even allowed a shy smile to break through when a child approached her, wrapping her in a warm, sincere hug.

Seeing Sofia's growing comfort, Henry and Luca exchanged a glance and led her to a modest hut near the village's center. Inside, the room was cozy, lit by the soft glow of a handmade lantern. Henry gestured for her to sit, offering her a cup of herbal tea.



"It's time we talked," Henry began, his tone shifting slightly, becoming more serious. "We want to know what drove you to take this step. And we want to talk about what comes next."

Sofia hesitated, her fingers curling around the warm cup, its heat anchoring her. She took a deep breath, knowing this conversation would change everything. For the first time in her life, she could freely explain her internal struggle. Her world was about to move forward, away from the pain and into the unknown.

Luca had laid out every detail, explaining the critical importance of accessing the documentation on the microchip. Without it, there was no path forward—no way to break through the system's highest levels of security. As he finished, Sofia sat quietly, her mind processing the enormity of what he was asking.

She understood the stakes all too well. Her work as a tech historian had given her a unique insight into the microchip's sophisticated authentication system. She knew its protection level was unmatched, designed to be impenetrable.

After a few moments of heavy silence, she finally spoke.



"If I'm going to help you..." Sofia began, her voice trembling slightly. She paused, feeling the weight of Henry and Luca's eyes on her. "I need a favor from you."

Henry straightened in his chair, while Luca leaned forward, sensing the gravity in her tone.

"I want to know the identities of the police officers who killed my parents," she said, her voice steadying as the words left her lips.

The room grew tense, the air thick with unspoken emotion.

Henry was the first to break the silence, his voice soft but firm. "Sofia, overexposing ourselves with hackings could compromise the whole operation. You know that as well as I do." He hesitated, his expression pained. "I understand your grief. Believe me, I do. But embracing that pain... it takes you to dark places. Places you don't want to be."

Sofia exhaled slowly, steadying herself before replying. "I know those dark places, Henry. I've been there before. I've lived with them for years." Her hands gripped the edge of the table. "But this isn't about revenge. I need to know who they are—real people, not the monsters I've built in my mind. I need to close that wound. I can't keep living with it open."



Her voice wavered, but the conviction behind her words was undeniable.

This time, it was Luca who spoke, his tone cautious but supportive. "Henry, I can do this without drawing too much attention. It's old data, buried deep in the archives. No one's checking it. I can get the profiles tied to that crime without compromising the operation."

Henry's brow furrowed deeply, his thoughts visible on his face. He wanted to deny the request, to steer Sofia away from the path he himself had walked. He knew too well the corrosive power of hatred, the way it could consume even the strongest resolve. But he also saw the determination in her eyes, the unshakable need for closure.

After a long pause, he sighed heavily. "Alright," he said at last, his voice tinged with reluctance. "Luca will get you the information. But there's one condition."

Sofia tilted her head slightly, waiting.

"Luca will be there with you when he hacks into the system," Henry continued. "This isn't something you'll face alone. And it's not something we'll allow to jeopardize everything we've built."



Sofia nodded solemnly, the tension in her body easing slightly. "I agree."

The agreement was sealed.

They were going to help each other. For Sofia, it was a step toward a long-awaited reckoning with her past. For Luca and Henry, it was the foundation of a fragile but vital partnership. The stakes were higher than ever, but for the first time, they faced them together.

The cyber-café was quiet, its labyrinth of private cabinets dimly lit. Sofia entered cautiously, her contact lenses disconnected as instructed. She made her way through the maze, her heart heavy with apprehension but steady with determination.

Inside the cabinet, Luca was already seated, his camouflage loop active, ensuring they were invisible to any surveillance the system might have in place. He glanced up as she entered, acknowledging her with a brief nod.

They exchanged no words—only a simple, inconspicuous "Hi." Neither dared risk saying anything aloud that could be recorded or traced.



Sofia sat in the chair Luca had prepared for her and gave him a silent nod, signaling him to proceed.

Luca worked quickly, his fingers gliding over the keyboard with practiced precision. It didn't take long for him to access the records of the crime. There was plenty of information, more than either of them expected. Mass media coverage of the incident had been extensive, a carefully curated narrative designed to vilify Sofia's parents.

He filtered through the sensationalized reports, digging deeper until he reached the police files. There, hidden beneath layers of bureaucracy and propaganda, was the truth.

The first revelation struck Sofia like a blow. Gianna Davis—the young woman her parents had trusted—had been a collaborator from the beginning.

Reality Labs had a recruitment program to infiltrate collaborators into every layer of society. Gianna was one of their younger operatives, recruited because of her psychopathy and her ability to fake emotions flawlessly.

Sofia's hands tightened in her lap as she read the cold, clinical report Gianna had written about her parents. Every word dripped with calculated detachment, reducing her parents to mere "subjects"—obstacles to be eliminated.



The final recommendation in Gianna's report was brutal and unflinching: "Extermination of the subjects is advised."

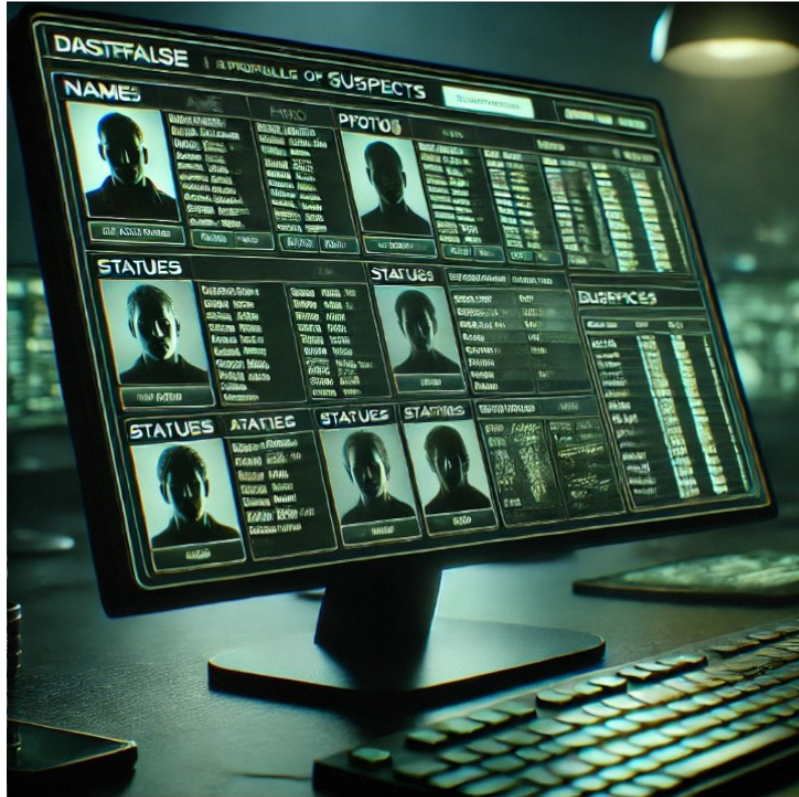
The file was marked with a green authorization stamp from a judge. Luca highlighted the judge's profile for Sofia to see—a mother of three at the time, now a grandmother, respected and celebrated in society. Sofia's parents' fates had been sealed in seconds, their "trial" nothing more than a cursory acknowledgment of Gianna's recommendation.

Sofia's vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes. Luca noticed her pain and placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

She looked at him, her expression a mix of gratitude and raw determination. "Keep going," her eyes seemed to say. She wanted all of it—no matter how much it hurt.

Luca continued, pulling up the records of the police squad dispatched to execute her parents. The squad had consisted of four officers—three men and one woman. Two had since retired, living comfortably in affluent neighborhoods, while the other two remained active, enjoying promotions and privileges far above what most officers could expect.

Further digging uncovered something darker: all four officers had been implicated in a drug money laundering operation years ago. The charges had been dropped, swept under the rug by someone high in the police hierarchy.



Sofia read the details in silence, her tears flowing freely now. She cried quietly, her body shaking as she tried to contain the storm inside her. For those responsible, the murder of her parents had been nothing more than a routine task. A day's work. A job they had relished.

Luca paused, then typed a message on the screen for Sofia to read:

"I can make the records public anonymously. The mass media will eat this up. They'll destroy them."

Sofia's gaze lingered on the words, her heart aching with the weight of the choice before her. Luca's offer was tempting. He could expose them, ruin their lives, and give her the vengeance she had craved for so long.

But then, she thought of the bigger picture. She thought of the system—the machine that had orchestrated all of this, that continued to grind countless lives into dust. Destroying four corrupt officers wouldn't change the world. It wouldn't stop another child from enduring what she had endured.

She met Luca's eyes, her expression resolute.

"No," she said softly. Her voice was steady now, the trembling gone.



Luca blinked in surprise but didn't argue. He could see it in her face—something had shifted.

"I'm going to help you," Sofia said, her voice firm. "We're going to destroy this rotten system."

The mission had become hers.



Chapter 12: Infiltration

Sofia stood in front of her mirror, her reflection staring back at her with a mix of determination and fear. She smoothed the lapels of her blazer, adjusting the professional outfit she had chosen for the day. She looked every bit the businesswoman she needed to be—polished, confident, and composed.

Today was the day. A mission that could change everything.

She knew how dangerous this was. Everything hinged on her ability to blend in seamlessly at the Reality Labs central headquarters. Luca had emphasized that the area where the critical documentation was stored operated without any augmented reality filters. In that environment, every detail mattered. She had to be the kind of visitor Reality Labs was used to receiving.

The day before, Sofia had contacted Reality Labs to announce her visit. She explained that she was gathering material for a book she was writing—a glowing account of how Reality Labs had laid the foundation for a society of “constant happiness.”

The pretense worked. Her reputation as a respected tech historian preceded her, bolstered by the lingering weight of an old recommendation from a powerful figure within Reality Labs. That endorsement, long forgotten by Sofia but clearly not by the system, ensured her access.



Getting through the front door wasn't the problem. The real challenge was something else entirely.

Luca had warned her about William Davis.

The inspector, relentless as ever, had returned to his surveillance with renewed energy after Luca's diversion. But something had changed in William's behavior. He seemed more alert, his eyes constantly scanning his surroundings, as though he knew he was being watched.

The diversion had worked, but it had also sharpened William's instincts. He now understood that the hacking went deeper than he'd initially thought. He was getting too close, and both Luca and Sofia knew there was no turning back now. The risk of being followed closely by William was a chance they had to take.

Sofia glanced at her watch—a simple analog design, elegant yet understated. The camera Luca had integrated was concealed perfectly at the center where the clock hands joined. He had assured her it would pass undetected by the security scanners. She prayed he was right.

The other essential piece of equipment was the tiny earpiece she now held between her fingers. It was made of silicon, meticulously color-matched to her skin tone, and virtually invisible. Luca had designed it to be undetectable by even the most advanced scanners.



Sofia inserted it carefully into her ear and tested the connection. "Luca, can you hear me?"

His voice crackled softly in her ear, calm and steady. "Loud and clear. Are you ready?"

She took a deep breath, willing her nerves to settle. "As ready as I'll ever be. Let's do this."

With a final glance in the mirror, Sofia activated her contact lenses, re-entering the augmented reality world. Her vision adjusted instantly, the dull tones of her apartment replaced by the vibrant, curated environment of My Reality.

The mission had begun.

Her pulse quickened as she left her apartment, every step bringing her closer to the point of no return. This wasn't just about her anymore—it was about all of them. The underground. The children playing freely. The parents raising their families without fear. It was about breaking the system that had stolen so much.

As Sofia walked out into the world, she didn't look back.



William was furious. He had been played—manipulated into abandoning Sofia’s surveillance. The realization gnawed at him, a persistent ache that refused to subside.

He had spent days combing through the video footage provided by Thomas Cole, searching for any inconsistencies. Initially, it seemed flawless. He used every tool at his disposal, running the footage through multiple analysis software programs. Nothing.

But William was not one to give up. He watched the footage again and again, meticulously dissecting every second. It wasn’t until exhaustion threatened to overtake him that he noticed it—a tiny detail, almost imperceptible.

It happened during the footage of Sofia reading on the park bench. The sequence seemed normal at first, but then William spotted something: Sofia, at one point, appeared to turn back to a page she had already read. It wasn’t obvious—the transition was nearly seamless. Whoever had created the loop had been a master, their work polished to near perfection.

William magnified the footage, ran it through enhanced imaging software, and scrutinized every pixel. Finally, the high-resolution analysis confirmed his suspicions: the system had been hacked to create a loop.



The implications were enormous. Someone had successfully bypassed the system, manipulating it with a level of skill William had never seen before. But was this enough to present to Reality Labs as definitive proof?

He doubted it. He needed more—irrefutable evidence of a connection between Sofia and the hacker. He needed to catch her in the act. If Sofia was working with someone, she would slip up eventually. And when she did, William would be there.

That morning, William noticed the change he had been waiting for.

Sofia had dressed in business attire, a sharp departure from her usual wardrobe. The only other time William had seen her dressed like that was in declassified footage from years ago—when she had visited Reality Labs headquarters.

His pulse quickened. This was it. Sofia was heading to Reality Labs, and he was determined to follow her every move.

William trailed her into the subway, maintaining a careful distance. She entered a subway car, and he slipped into another two cars away. From his vantage point, he could see her faint reflection in the window, her movements deliberate yet too casual.



William smirked grimly. He recognized the signs—the stiffness of someone trying too hard to appear relaxed. Sofia was tense, and she was hiding something.

When Sofia exited at a busy hub station, William followed, weaving through the dense crowd. The station was a labyrinth of corridors and connections, its chaotic nature forcing him to close the distance more than he preferred. He didn't want to risk losing her.

But Sofia wasn't alone in her mission. Hundreds of eyes were aiding Luca in keeping track of William.

As William reached a crossroads in the station, a sudden commotion erupted. A group of people stood frozen in the middle of the corridor, their arms flailing wildly as they cried out in panic.

"We can't see!" one of them screamed. "What's happening?"

Another, more frantic, grabbed William by the arm, their voice trembling with terror. "Please, help me! I've gone blind!"

William's instincts flared. It was a trap.



He shoved through the group as quickly as he could, his frustration mounting. The chaotic scene had cost him precious seconds—just enough for Sofia to vanish completely.

For a moment, William stood in the middle of the corridor, his jaw clenched, scanning the sea of faces moving around him. He had lost her trail.

But he didn't lose hope. If his hunch was correct, he knew exactly where she was headed.

Reality Labs.

William tightened his grip on his determination and set off, navigating the bustling station with renewed focus. He would find her. And this time, there would be no escape.

Sofia stepped off the subway at the station nearest to Reality Labs headquarters, her heart pounding in her chest. She adjusted her posture, trying to project confidence despite the crushing weight of fear that threatened to take over.

Luca's voice came softly through the earpiece, his tone calm but laced with urgency. "Sofia, William's already here. He's waiting for you."



Her stomach clenched, but Luca quickly added, "Remember, he's still conducting this surveillance unofficially. If he had solid evidence, he would have escalated the investigation by now. And I've checked—he doesn't have clearance to access the area where you're heading. You should be safe."

Should be. Sofia latched onto the words, but they did little to calm her nerves. She'd accepted the risks when she agreed to this mission, but that didn't mean they didn't terrify her.

Reality Labs headquarters loomed in front of her, an imposing campus sprawling across a vast, meticulously landscaped estate. It resembled a high-tech fortress wrapped in deceptive elegance. The manicured gardens and sleek, futuristic buildings stood in stark contrast to the suffocating control the corporation wielded over society.

Sofia passed through the main gate with ease, her credentials accepted without question. She had played her role perfectly so far. The ten-minute walk to the central building felt much longer, each step amplifying the knot in her stomach.

Three minutes into her walk, Luca's voice cut through the silence. "William's entered the grounds. This is where I lose visual on him."



Her breath hitched, but Luca continued, his voice steady. "Everyone in that area has the security microchip. I can't hack their lenses. I'll guide you as best as I can through the earpiece, but from now on, you're on your own for what you see."

The words hit hard, but Sofia pushed down the wave of fear creeping up her spine. She had to focus. She had come too far to falter now.

The central building where Sofia's goal awaited was at the heart of Reality Labs' most advanced and secretive operations. The structure towered above her as she approached, its sleek design exuding power and precision.

The entrance hall was breathtaking in its sterile opulence. Polished surfaces reflected the soft glow of futuristic lighting, and lush greenery was strategically placed to evoke a false sense of warmth. Above, open spaces connected the floors, giving the illusion of transparency in a place built on secrecy.

Every detail was designed to impress, from the luxurious furniture to the stylishly concealed security cameras, which watched everything with silent vigilance. Sofia's gaze flickered briefly to the fourth floor—the destination of her mission. Her heart raced as she imagined the sensitive documentation waiting for her there.



She approached the reception desk, her carefully rehearsed words echoing in her mind. Her palms felt clammy, but she kept her composure, hiding the growing terror clawing at her insides.

The receptionist greeted her with a professional smile, her demeanor polished and inviting. "Welcome to Advanced Reality Labs. How can I help you today?"

Sofia returned the smile, channeling every ounce of calm she could muster. "Hello. My name is Sofia Carter. I have an appointment to consult documentation for a project I'm working on."

The receptionist nodded and turned to her computer, her fingers gliding across the keyboard as she searched for the appointment. Sofia held her breath, her mind racing through potential scenarios.

Finally, the receptionist looked up, her smile brightening. "We're happy to see you back, Ms. Carter. You have full access to the documentation area. Please feel free to ask for anything you need. We're at your disposal."

The elevator doors slid open with a soft chime, revealing the floor where the critical documents were stored. Sofia stepped out, her pulse hammering in her ears. The design of the space was stark and modern, with transparent walls that exposed the inner workings of the laboratories. Scientists moved methodically at their workstations, engrossed in their tasks, the hum of machinery filling the air.



She forced herself to breathe evenly as she began walking toward the documentation area. Every step felt deliberate, calculated. But her composure cracked the moment she caught sight of Head Inspector William Davis entering the reception area below.

Her heart skipped a beat. He was here.

She instinctively sidestepped to avoid being in his line of sight, her movements subtle but urgent. Her gaze darted away, her body stiff with tension. For a moment, she froze, her mind racing with the possibilities of what could go wrong.

A couple of seconds passed before she resumed walking. No one around her seemed to notice her hesitation, but Sofia knew she had to keep moving. Her face had betrayed her fear for just a fraction of a second, but even that felt like too much.

Reaching the high-security access door, Sofia stopped in front of the scanner. She pressed her wrist against the panel, allowing the system to read her implanted microchip. The soft beep of approval felt deafening in the silence. She prayed the system wouldn't pick up on her spiking vitals—they were far from the calm, steady baseline it was designed to expect.



The door slid open with a hiss, and Sofia stepped inside.

Immediately, her contact lenses powered down, leaving her in the raw, unfiltered reality of the high-security area. Here, the system didn't allow My Reality to function. Nothing was connected to external networks—not the doors, not the scanners, and certainly not the files she had come to retrieve. The original architect of the microchip authentication system had designed this area with absolute isolation in mind, ensuring no data could be leaked.

Sofia's lips curved into the faintest hint of a smile. No matter how perfect the system, the human factor was always its weakest link.

The secure area was starkly different from the rest of the building. Unlike the transparent walls of the laboratories, this space was closed off, offering her a small reprieve from prying eyes. But the reprieve came with a ticking clock—William was too close, and time was running out.

Sofia scanned the room quickly, locating the documentation. It was stored in a slim, unassuming binder on a steel shelf. As she flipped through the pages, she realized the simplicity of the microchip authentication system was its genius. It was entirely isolated, relying solely on internal protocols to authenticate access.



The entire document, including the schematics, was no more than 100 pages long.

Sofia worked swiftly, her fingers steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. She raised her watch and began photographing the pages, the camera lens embedded in the center capturing each one with crisp precision.

Page by page, she moved methodically, the faint clicks of the watch camera the only sound in the room.

The process took five minutes—an eternity in her mind. She couldn't stop imagining William downstairs, his sharp eyes and relentless determination. He wouldn't have clearance to enter this area, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

As she snapped the final page, she slipped the binder back into its exact position on the shelf. She exhaled, allowing herself a single moment of relief before glancing toward the exit.

The mission wasn't over. Not yet. She had to get out before the inspector had a chance to escalate.

Sofia straightened her jacket, squared her shoulders, and made her way toward the door. Her fear hadn't left her, but something else had joined it—a quiet resolve.



As Sofia stepped out of the restricted documentation area, her heart stopped. In the reception hall below, she saw Inspector William Davis entering the elevator alongside a security guard. Her stomach clenched as dread settled over her.

What access did William have? she wondered, her mind racing. What would he do if he found her?

She couldn't afford to find out. If her assumptions were correct, they were heading directly to the documentation area she had just left. She needed to act fast—she needed to disappear.

Her eyes darted down the corridor, searching for a way out. Another high-security door caught her attention. Taking a deep breath, she pressed her wrist to the scanner, praying her microchip would grant her access.

Bingo. The door hissed open, and she slipped inside just as she heard the soft chime of the elevator arriving.

The door slid shut behind her, leaving her alone in a small room. Her breath came in shallow bursts as she tried to calm herself. She couldn't see outside, couldn't confirm where William was or what he was doing. She calculated silently—they would reach the documentation area in about one minute.



Her thoughts were interrupted by a sharp noise behind her. Startled, she turned to face a large window that overlooked an enclosed space. A group of people stood inside the room beyond, scattered and visibly distressed.

Her eyes widened in recognition.

They were from the underground.

Their clothes were tattered, the same ragged attire she had seen days before. None of them bore the telltale signs of the contact lenses implant. They looked frightened, cornered.

One of them slammed a fist against the glass, screaming in desperation.

Sofia's blood ran cold.

Before she could process what she was seeing, movement from the ceiling caught her attention.

Several machine guns deployed, their sleek forms descending with clinical precision.

The next ten seconds were pure horror.



One by one, the guns opened fire, the room erupting in chaos. Bullets tore through the bodies of the captives with merciless efficiency, their screams muffled by the thick glass. Some fell instantly, while others crumpled to the floor in agony, blood pooling beneath them.

Some of the victims pounded on the window, pleading for mercy, their tear-streaked faces turned toward Sofia. Others collapsed, resigned to their fate.

Sofia stood frozen, her mind flashing back to the night her parents had been executed. She felt the same helplessness, the same unbearable agony.

When the gunfire finally ceased, the silence was deafening. The bodies in the room were unrecognizable, torn apart by the relentless assault.

Sofia's hands trembled, her breath caught in her throat. She didn't know that this had been just one of the hundreds of tests performed regularly in this building. To the scientists, these people were nothing more than "training samples" for the AI—a collection of numbers in a spreadsheet.

But Sofia didn't have time to dwell on the horror. The minute she had estimated was almost up.



She forced herself to move, her legs shaky but determined. She opened the door cautiously, peering into the corridor. It was empty.

Now or never.

She stepped out and headed straight for the elevator. The sound of her heels echoed faintly in the corridor, but she didn't hesitate. Reaching the elevator, she pressed the button and stepped inside, her fingers trembling as she selected the floor for the reception area.

When the doors opened, the receptionist greeted her with a warm smile.

"Sofia, have you contacted your police escort?"

Sofia's mind raced, but her response was quick and steady, her tone professional. "Yes, thank you. He needed to check some security issues upstairs. I'll be waiting for him outside."

The receptionist nodded, satisfied with the explanation. Sofia forced a polite smile before heading for the exit.

As soon as she stepped outside, the cool air hit her like a wave, but it did little to soothe her frayed nerves. She walked briskly toward the outer gate, her pace faster than it should have been, but she couldn't stay in that building a second longer.



Her thoughts churned, a chaotic storm of terror and anger. Everything she had seen in the past ten minutes had shaken her to the core. The system wasn't just flawed—it was monstrous.

Sofia didn't stop walking until she was well beyond the gates, her breaths coming in shallow gasps.

She was free—for now. But what she had witnessed inside those walls would haunt her forever.

William stood in the documentation room, his sharp eyes scanning every corner. He was looking for any sign of Sofia, but the space was empty. She had been there—he was certain of it.

He had pulled strings to fabricate a request for a security escort for Sofia Carter, a request that had been approved without question. It wasn't unusual for individuals with high-security clearance to receive such protection. Everything had checked out, allowing him to follow her movements undetected—until now.

"She told me she needed to verify additional classified data related to her book," William said aloud, keeping his voice even. "But she didn't specify where."



The security guard accompanying him reviewed the system logs on his tablet. "The records indicate Ms. Carter went to the test room observatory," the guard replied, his tone professional but neutral.

William's interest sharpened. The test room observatory?

As they left the documentation room, he couldn't shake the gnawing feeling that Sofia was involved in something far more significant than he had initially suspected.

At the entrance to the test room observatory, the guard hesitated slightly, double-checking the clearance levels for both Sofia and William. His expression flickered, the briefest shadow of unease crossing his face before he nodded and opened the door.

William noticed the change. What made him tense?

The heavy door slid open with a quiet hiss, revealing a small, sterile room. The space was unremarkable, save for the large, one-way mirror dominating one wall. It reminded William of the interrogation rooms he was all too familiar with—the kind used for criminal identification.

He stepped inside, his gaze immediately drawn to the mirror.



And then he saw it.

William froze, the scene on the other side of the glass searing itself into his mind.

The room beyond was a slaughterhouse. Bodies were scattered across the floor, some torn to pieces, others twisted unnaturally. Blood coated the walls and pooled beneath the dead.

The machine guns mounted on the ceiling remained active, their cold, mechanical precision still scanning for targets. Children were among the victims.

For a moment, William was utterly speechless. His mind struggled to process what he was seeing, the sheer brutality of it.

Seconds passed before the fury erupted.

He spun toward the security guard, his face contorted with a rage he didn't know he was capable of.

"I WANT TO SEE THE MAXIMUM RESPONSIBLE—RIGHT NOW!"

William Davis sat in the opulent, high-tech meeting room, his hands clenched into fists on the gleaming surface of the table. The room, with its sterile perfection and understated luxury, was designed to intimidate. But William wasn't here to be impressed. He was here for justice.



This was the first time he would meet our man—the enigmatic figure behind Reality Labs, the architect of the system he had devoted his career to upholding. He hoped, fervently, that it would also be the last.

The meeting had been arranged with startling speed. Fifteen minutes after he had demanded to see the person responsible, the word had come: our man would meet him personally.

William's jaw tightened. Good. Let the monster face me.

The faint metallic sound of prosthetic steps echoed down the hallway, growing louder until the door slid open. Our man entered, his mechanical body moving with unnerving precision. His face—a flawless, synthetic mask of youth—wore a broad smile as he approached.

"Inspector Davis," our man began, his voice smooth and polished, the embodiment of corporate charm. "What an honor to finally meet you! I've heard such extraordinary tales of your investigations. On behalf of the entire Reality Labs family, allow me to offer my congratulations for your exemplary service."

William's glare could have cut steel. "Cut the crap." His voice was sharp, unwavering. "I know about your 'tests.' I'm here to take you to prison. Not even your army of lawyers will save you from the death penalty. You're a monster, and you're going to pay."



Our man's smile widened as he let out a rich, amused laugh. It wasn't the reaction of a man cornered—it was the reaction of a man who held all the cards.

"Oh, my dear inspector," he said, raising his prosthetic hands in mock surrender. "You're so wonderfully naïve. Truly, you're a credit to good, innocent people everywhere. It's almost endearing how little you understand."

William didn't flinch. "Don't think you can talk your way out of this. I've got everything recorded. I have all the proof I need to bury you—and your entire operation—in hell."

Our man turned to a nearby tray and poured himself a glass of champagne, the sound of the liquid faint against the tense silence. He held the glass aloft, offering one to William, who didn't so much as glance at it.

"What proof?" our man asked, his voice calm, almost teasing.

And then it hit William.

The realization landed with the weight of a sledgehammer. Our man wasn't worried because he didn't need to be. He controlled reality itself—or at least what everyone perceived as reality. The recordings, the evidence, even the very fabric of truth—none of it was safe from him.



For all William's meticulous planning, for all his righteous fury, he now understood the scale of the power he was up against. Our man wasn't just untouchable; he was a god in this system.

Our man's eyes gleamed as he saw the recognition settle in William's face. He raised his glass in a mock toast, the smirk on his prosthetic face never faltering.

"Come now, Inspector Davis. Thanks to you, we've been able to patch a critical security flaw. Ms. Carter's clearance? Revoked. It was a mistake that should have been rectified long ago, and thanks to your diligence, it has been. Rest assured, I'll personally see to it that the person responsible learns their lesson."

He took a sip of champagne, savoring the moment. "You've been our hero today, inspector! You should be celebrating. No one will exploit the system again—not on my watch."

The door to the meeting room slid open with a quiet hiss, the gesture as dismissive as the man standing before William.

No more words were needed.

William rose from his seat and walked out, his shoulders stiff, his head high—but inside, he was shattered.



He had spent his life upholding the system, believing in its promise of order and justice. Now he knew the truth: it wasn't justice he served, but a machine of control and cruelty.

He had fought to protect a reality that wasn't real.

As he stepped out of the building, the weight of his defeat settled over him like a storm cloud. William Davis had faced the system's architect, and he had lost.

Utterly.



Chapter 13: RuNNinG oUt Of tiME

After William left the opulent meeting room, our man remained motionless, gazing out the floor-to-ceiling window. The city stretched before him, a glittering tapestry of artificial perfection crafted under his rule. Yet, despite its beauty, his mind was elsewhere.

William had come dangerously close to unraveling everything.

For all his bravado, our man knew how close the inspector had been to creating a disaster. If William had shared what he saw in the test room observatory within the first five minutes, it could have been catastrophic.

The report had reached him quickly—but not too quickly for comfort. Five minutes after William's discovery, his personal security team informed him of the breach. Acting immediately, he had ordered every trace of the video footage scrubbed from the system. It wasn't enough to delete it; he ensured it was overwritten, fragmented beyond recovery.

He had narrowly avoided a PR nightmare.

While our man controlled most media outlets, he didn't control them all. Rival networks—small but tenacious—would have pounced on the story, spreading it far and wide. Even with his influence, containing the fallout would have been messy, costly, and potentially dangerous to his legacy.



Our man allowed himself a wry smile, raising a glass of champagne to his lips. William wouldn't get another chance.

He had considered taking more drastic measures to silence the inspector—an accident, a fabricated scandal, or something more permanent. But those actions carried their own risks. William's disappearance or disgrace could attract the very attention our man wanted to avoid.

Without evidence, William was powerless. He could scream his accusations to the heavens, but without proof, no one would listen.

And thanks to today's events, William would never have access to classified information again.

But the day's challenges had taken their toll.

William's investigation was merely the second blow—one that our man had managed to parry with calculated precision. It was the first blow that had truly shaken him.

His fingers tightened around the glass as his thoughts drifted back to the earlier crisis.

That blow, unlike William's interference, wasn't something he could mitigate or control. It wasn't a PR problem or a breach in the system.



It was personal.

Our man gave the city one last lingering glance. The kingdom he had built from nothing stretched before him, a testament to his brilliance and ambition. But deep down, he knew the truth.

He wouldn't be able to enjoy it for much longer.

The realization burned, a slow and steady ache. For the first time in decades, the man who controlled reality itself felt the faintest flicker of something he hadn't experienced in a long time:

Fear.

Our man entered the laboratory where the AI was being trained on his brain patterns. The sterile, white-lit space buzzed with quiet activity, but his presence immediately silenced the hum of conversation.

He requested a private meeting with the lead scientist, Dr. Carol Winters, a woman who had been at the forefront of this project for over a decade. Carol had worked closely with our man long enough to recognize the subtle shifts in his demeanor, and today, something was undeniably different.



The arrogance that usually radiated from him was muted. In its place, there was something else—something darker.

As Carol entered the meeting room, the sense of unease clawed at her. The project was her life's work, but even she wasn't immune to the fear that came with disappointing him.

They sat across from each other at a sleek, minimalist table, its surface reflecting the cool blue glow of the room's lighting.

Our man's voice broke the silence, his tone somber and uncharacteristically direct. "When exactly will the project be fully operational?"

Carol blinked, caught off guard. Deadlines had never been part of their conversations before. They both knew the enormity of the task—mapping and recreating every nuance of his personality, decision-making processes, and psychological traits. It was a meticulous process that couldn't be rushed.

"We're making steady progress," she began cautiously. "But to give an exact date for full operational capability is... difficult. We've focused primarily on the critical hard-decision areas—crisis response, ethical dilemmas—but the more routine aspects, like administrative operations, still require significant work."



She paused, gauging his reaction. The prosthetic face didn't move, but his silence was palpable. It filled the room like a weight pressing down on her chest.

Hastily, she continued, "At our current rate, I'd estimate a first release could be possible in about a year."

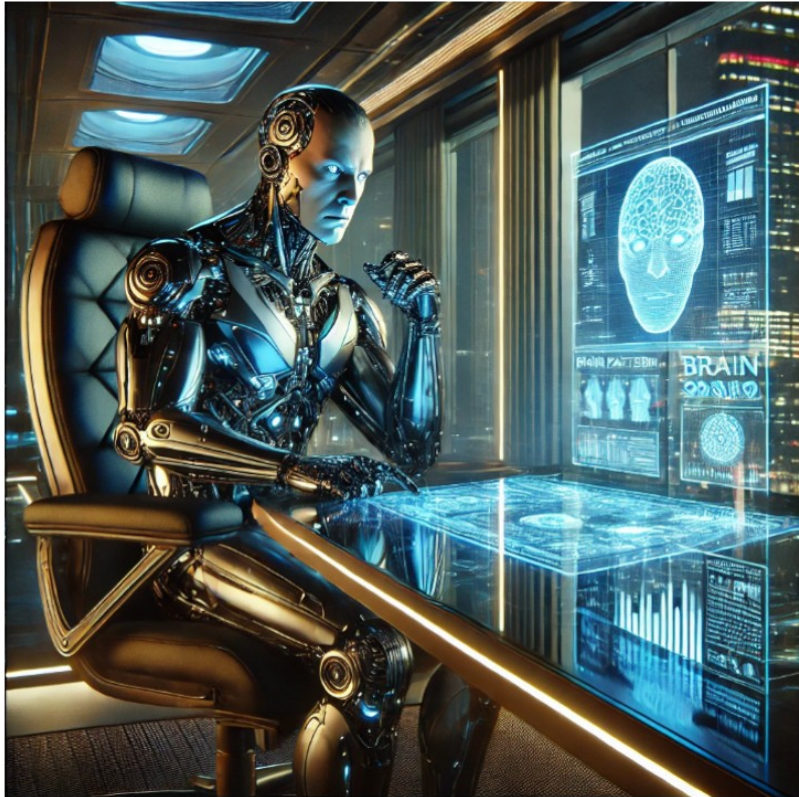
The sound of our man inhaling deeply—a faint, mechanical hiss accompanying the movement of his prosthetic nostrils—was the only response for a moment. Then he spoke, his tone unwavering:

"You have two months to complete it."

Carol's heart sank. Two months? The demand wasn't just unreasonable; it was impossible. But she knew him well enough to understand that once his mind was made up, there was no room for negotiation.

She began to stammer, her voice tinged with desperation. "But... sir, for that timeline, we would need you to be here almost constantly. We can't train the AI without continuous access to your interactions, and we know how busy you are, so I don't see ho—"

Our man interrupted her, his voice cutting through hers like a scalpel. "I will be here. Always."



The weight of his words hung in the air as he leaned forward slightly. "Let's start."

One week remained. One week until the AI would be ready for full deployment.

Our man sat in his private quarters, meticulously reviewing the presentation he was set to deliver to the world's media. Everything had to be perfect—no mistakes, no missteps, no room for failure.

He reached into the drawer of his polished desk, retrieving several bottles of pills. Pouring the contents into his hand, he stared at the mixture of capsules for a moment before swallowing a handful in one gulp. The bitter aftertaste lingered, but he didn't flinch. Mistakes were not an option.

The weight of the past two months pressed down on him like a suffocating fog. The day William had uncovered the experiments, our man had received news far worse:

The degradation of his brain was accelerating.

The diagnosis had been merciless. In nine months, he would be reduced to a vegetative state. His mind, once the sharpest in the world, would wither into silence. No amount of money, influence, or cutting-edge technology could halt the inevitable.



The doctors had explained the progression in clinical detail:

- He would lose the ability to finish sentences.
- Conversations would trail off mid-thought.
- He would freeze, unable to respond to external stimuli.
- His short-term memory would fade until he was incapable of remembering even the simplest things.

But the process had started faster than he expected. The first lapses had already begun—words lost, moments of stillness he couldn't explain. For the first time, he truly felt the fragility of his existence.

Desperation had driven him to force the doctor into revealing a dangerous alternative: an experimental drug regimen.

The drugs came with a grim bargain. They would grant him two months of focused clarity, suppressing the visible symptoms of his mental decay. But in exchange, they would accelerate the inevitable. By the end of those two months, his decline would be catastrophic, leaving him barely functional in his final days.



Our man had accepted the deal without hesitation. Better to burn bright than fade away.

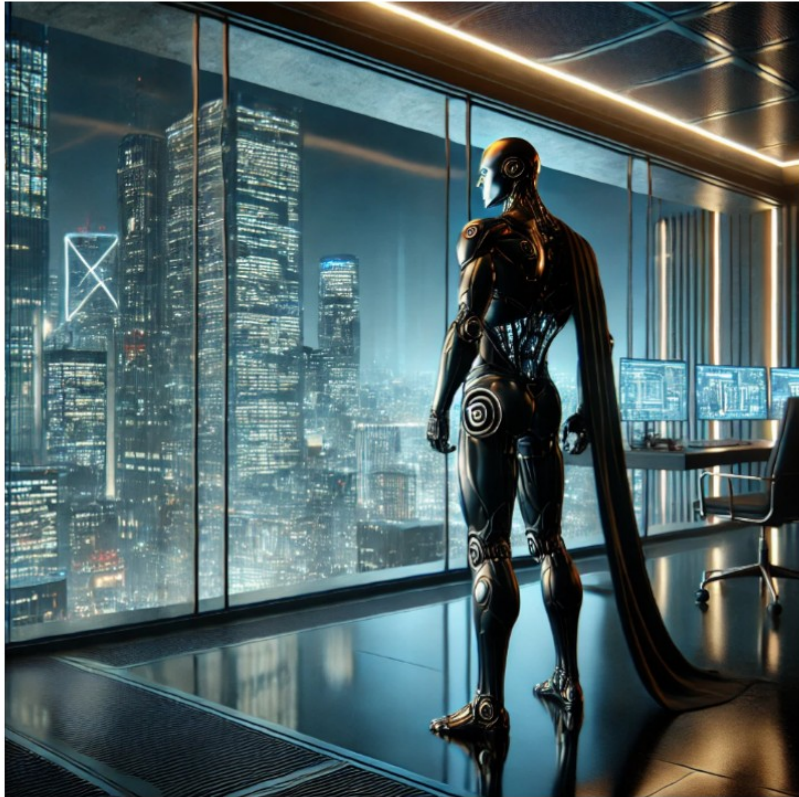
Now, the deadline loomed. He had fought valiantly, but the signs of his deterioration were becoming harder to ignore. The doctor's timeline had been precise: he had one week left, two at most before his mind spiraled beyond repair.

In the past two months, he had pushed himself to the brink.

- 16-hour days spent in the lab, guiding and training the AI.
- Barely five hours of sleep a night, only because the doctor insisted it was necessary to maintain his cognitive abilities.
- His team, forced to remain at the lab alongside him, had worked under brutal conditions. They slept in makeshift quarters, lived on catered meals, and were forbidden from leaving.

Our man didn't care about their sacrifices. He would compensate them generously—but no one could leave until the work was finished.

Every moment of his dwindling life was poured into the AI. He didn't just train it to replicate his public-facing decisions or the critical, high-stakes moments. He demanded the AI be prepared for the darkest scenarios, ones the team hadn't dared to prioritize before.



Torture.

Mass suppression.

Sacrificing lives for the greater good—or for his own gain.

Our man insisted the AI handle such extremes precisely as he would. There could be no deviation, no hesitation. He would not trust his immortality to something weak.

Now, at last, the end was near.

He rose from his chair, glancing at the mirrored walls of his quarters. His reflection stared back at him—a man more machine than human, clutching at the final threads of his life.

The presentation to the media was his final public act. Beyond this, there would be nothing more.

His hand trembled slightly as he adjusted his tie. He forced the tremor to stop, his jaw tightening with resolve.

This was the moment. The culmination of everything.

The world would soon know of his eternal legacy.



****Chapter 14: No way back to normal****

William stood motionless in the cold, desolate industrial area, the biting wind cutting through his coat as if to remind him of the peril he had willingly embraced. The faint hum of the distant city was barely audible over the rustle of trash blown across the cracked pavement. It was 2:00 AM, and he was exactly where he had been instructed to be.

A lifetime in the service of the system had taught him to trust nothing, to question everything. But tonight, he wasn't questioning anything.

He didn't flinch when he felt the hands seize him from behind. The fabric of the bag was rough as it slipped over his head, plunging him into darkness. His breath came steady, controlled. This was what he wanted.

He wasn't here to fight.

As the hands guided him forward, the sounds of his own footsteps echoed unnaturally in the emptiness. His mind wandered to what lay ahead. Would he survive this night? Would he even want to?

For years, William had been the system's enforcer, its loyal sentinel, upholding a reality he now understood was a lie. The things he had seen—the experiments, the ruthless efficiency of the machine—had shattered his faith beyond repair.



Now, standing at the precipice, he knew there was no way back to normal.

When the bag came off, he would face one of two fates.

Freedom—or death.

And in that moment, he wasn't sure which one he was rooting for.

William sat motionless in his apartment, staring blankly at the screen. The livestream had just ended, but its haunting echoes remained. Our man's announcement still reverberated in his mind.

The corporate overlord had unveiled his crowning achievement to the world: a powerful AI that would ensure the continuation of society's "perfection." The launch was scheduled for the following week, and the announcement was delivered with the usual confidence and theatrical flair. But to William, it wasn't a revelation—it was a death sentence.

He couldn't move, couldn't think beyond the overwhelming weight of what he'd just witnessed. He was back in his worst nightmare.



The sterile, white-walled room flashed before his eyes. The bodies. The children. The gruesome scene played on an endless loop in his mind: corpses torn apart, blood splattered across pristine walls, and the machine guns still scanning for targets with cold, mechanical precision.

At the center of it all, the artificial intelligence. The abomination. A soulless entity responsible for the slaughter, processing human lives as data points, as problems to be erased.

And now, they were going to release it into the world.

For two months, William had tried to bury the horror of that day. He had taken a leave of absence from work, retreating into himself. The experience had broken something in him.

In the first weeks, he had been a shadow of himself, barely able to leave his bed. The nightmares had been relentless, dragging him back to that room every night, forcing him to relive the carnage. He awoke drenched in sweat, the screams of the victims ringing in his ears long after he opened his eyes.

After a month, he began clawing his way back to some semblance of normalcy. He told himself there was no fighting Reality Labs, no changing what they were. The system was absolute.



But he could still make a difference—couldn't he?

He convinced himself that, even under the system's control, his work as a respected citizen had value. He could do good, even in a flawed world. He could protect those who couldn't protect themselves.

It was a fragile, tenuous peace he had forged with himself.

But it all shattered the moment our man made his announcement.

The AI wasn't just a security tool, as they had claimed. It wasn't confined to sterile test rooms or high-security facilities. It was being groomed to replace him entirely.

That monster would become the new overlord.

William's stomach churned with rage and self-loathing. How had he not seen this coming? They had lied to him, used him, played him like a fool from the very beginning.

And now, as the pieces fell into place, the weight of his failure threatened to crush him.

But as the terror and despair clawed at his mind, another feeling rose within him. A resolve.



This was going to end—today.

William's hand trembled as he reached for his coat. He knew what he had to do.

There was no way back to normal.

Sofia's life had returned to its ordinary, suffocating routine—but nothing about it felt normal.

The privileges that had once set her apart from the masses were gone. After her incursion into the Reality Labs headquarters, her ability to turn off her contact lenses had been revoked. Now, like everyone else, she was trapped in the sanitized, corporate-approved version of reality. The real world—raw and unfiltered—was lost to her.

Not long after leaving the laboratory, she received a notification: her high-level access authorization had been permanently revoked.

Sofia and her allies had expected this. They had prepared for it. As soon as she exited the headquarters, she had passed the watch containing the critical documentation to a courier from the underground at a prearranged meeting point. It had taken mere minutes for the transfer to be completed, luckily that brief window had been enough before they cut her privilege.



Now, she was isolated. Disconnected.

She couldn't meet with Luca, Henry, or anyone from the underground anymore—not until the risky, dangerous plan they were preparing could come to fruition.

But Sofia wasn't entirely cut off.

The underground had found ways to bypass the system's omnipresent surveillance. Over time, they had revived an ancient method of communication: Morse code.

By scratching patterns into surfaces invisible to the augmented reality lenses, they could send messages undetected. The corporations, aware of this defiance, had declared it illegal, but enforcement was difficult. As long as the messages were placed in isolated areas—dark alleys, hidden walls, or private spaces—they were nearly impossible to trace.

Sofia and Luca had agreed on a simple method: Luca would leave messages in Morse code on the back of her apartment mailbox.

Just one day after her mission, Sofia received her first message. A single word: 'PROGRESS'.



Sofia traced the etched marks with trembling fingers, her breath hitching. That single word lifted the crushing weight she had been carrying since leaving the headquarters. Her mission had been a success.

For days, she had been tormented by the fear that, in her terror, she might have missed a critical page or detail in the documentation. But now, that single word reassured her—her sacrifice hadn't been in vain.

Still, there was more she needed to share.

During her mission, Sofia hadn't been able to tell Luca or the others about what she had seen in the test room. The horrors she had witnessed—the cold slaughter of human beings, the indifferent AI monitoring the massacre—haunted her every waking moment.

After leaving the restricted area, her contact lenses had automatically reconnected to the system. Luca, listening through the earpiece, could only hear her ragged breathing. He had known something was wrong, but she couldn't explain. Not then.

That night, back in her apartment, Sofia devised a plan.



Pretending to read an article on her computer, she carefully wrote a letter in pencil, describing everything she had seen. The underground needed to know the full truth.

She placed the letter inside her mailbox, confident that Luca would retrieve it during his next visit. And he did. When she saw the Morse code message and knew her letter had been taken, she felt a flicker of hope.

Her friends would know. They would understand the monster they were up against.

For now, Sofia endured her solitude, keeping her head down and playing her role as a good citizen. But she wasn't defeated.

She was a part of something bigger now—a rebellion that couldn't be erased.

No system, no matter how powerful, could suppress the truth forever.

Sofia managed to resume her life with a precision born of necessity, slipping seamlessly back into her role as a dutiful citizen. She maintained the narrative of working on her book—a story carefully crafted to deflect suspicion from her true intentions.



As far as the system was concerned, her visit to the documentation room aligned with her fabricated project. Her unauthorized entry into the test room had been dismissed as harmless curiosity, albeit one that cost her the privileges she once held. That curiosity, they concluded, had exhausted the trust Reality Labs placed in her.

But that was all.

She wasn't a suspect.

The head inspector, William Davis, hadn't reported her. His actions had been classified as standard procedure, his presence explained as part of an elaborate ploy to infiltrate the headquarters under the guise of protecting her. It was an odd choice for someone of his rank, but the system accepted it without question.

For the system, Sofia was no longer important. She was just another citizen now—ordinary, disconnected, irrelevant.

For the next two months, Sofia rebuilt the monotony of her life.

No more secret meetings. No more clandestine plans. She returned to her classes, her solitary walks in the park, and her books. She knew how to play her part perfectly. And for a time, the routine soothed her fractured nerves.



But that fragile calm shattered the day the corporate overlord of Reality Labs made his announcement.

Sofia watched in silent horror as the overlord revealed the impending deployment of the artificial intelligence, boasting of its ability to secure the future and perpetuate their oppressive society. It felt like a death sentence.

The emotional weight of that moment was crushing. The despair she felt mirrored the hopelessness she had glimpsed in the eyes of the victims in the test room. But she couldn't let it show, not in any way that the system might detect.

Yet, despite her efforts, her eyes betrayed her.

Sitting in the college cafeteria, her gaze drifted aimlessly over her untouched meal. The noise of conversation around her blurred into a dull hum. She was trapped in her thoughts, the announcement replaying over and over in her mind.

Then, across the table, she noticed him.

William Davis.

His eyes held the same haunted look, a reflection of her own despair. She didn't need words to understand.



He offered her a small, shy smile.

He said nothing.

Under the table, he slid a small stone into her hand. Its rough surface was cool against her skin. As she touched it, she could feel the etched marks of a Morse code message—subtle but unmistakable.

"I want to disconnect."



****Chapter 15: Disconnection****

William woke to a world of darkness, a bandage tightly wrapped over his eyes. He wasn't sure if the delicate surgery to remove his contact lens implants had been successful. His body felt weak, his mind clouded with uncertainty. Yet, he asked the question that mattered most:

"Am I free?"

A calm voice answered—one he had only known as a phantom on the other side of his investigations. It was Luca.

"Yes, you are," Luca replied with quiet certainty.

William tried to sit up, but his strength failed him. Hands steadied him, guiding him upright. He felt their care, their patience.

"We're going to remove the bandages now," Luca continued. "Don't panic if you can't see clearly at first. It'll take time for your vision to adjust."

William remained still as the bandages were unwound. Whatever the outcome, he wasn't afraid. Whether he could see or not, he was out of the system.

That alone was a victory.



As the bandages fell away, the world remained a blur. He blinked, squinting against the dim light. Shapes and colors began to sharpen, edges forming out of the haze. Slowly, his vision returned.

And for the first time in his life, William saw unfiltered reality.

It wasn't the polished, hyper-saturated perfection he'd known his entire life. The colors were muted, the imperfections stark, the light less forgiving—but it was real.

A smile crept across his face.

In front of him stood Luca, his relaxed demeanor offering reassurance. William took in the sight of him for the first time: a man barely thirty, with sharp, intelligent eyes and an air of calm determination.

Beside him was Henry, older and weathered, his face lined with years of struggle. His expression was serious but not unkind. He regarded William with a mixture of caution and curiosity.

Henry spoke first. "William, I'm sorry to ask this so soon after such a dangerous operation, but we've never had someone like you before. A high-ranking member of the police force elite, willingly going through disconnection... We have questions."



William nodded. He understood their skepticism. He would have felt the same.

"I understand," he said simply. "Ask whatever you need. I have nothing to hide."

It was Luca who asked the first question, his tone direct but not accusatory.

"Why?"

William exhaled slowly, the weight of the past months pressing on him. At least now, he could share the burden.

"I did it," he began, his voice steady, "because we're running out of time."

He spoke for what felt like hours, recounting everything he had seen and learned.

He described the experiments in the test room, the horrors perpetrated to train an AI with the capacity for monstrous decisions. He detailed the cold, calculated indifference of the system, and how the announcement by Reality Labs' overlord had brought everything into focus.



He explained his realization that radical action was the only way to prevent catastrophe—that this wasn't just about control or compliance anymore. It was about survival.

When William finished, silence filled the room. Luca and Henry exchanged a glance, their expressions somber.

Henry spoke first. "William, we believe you. Everything you've told us aligns with findings we've uncovered in our research. But we didn't fully grasp the true goal of the AI. When Sofia told us about the horrors in that room, we thought they were testing enhanced security measures—meant to contain us, limit our movements. But now... It's so much worse."

Luca added, "If the system is deployed in a week, we don't have time to waste." He turned to William. "I hope you don't mind, but we've also removed the security micro-chip from your wrist. We need it for our plans."

William nodded. "Take whatever you need. I want you to know—I'm all in. Whatever you're planning, you can count on me."

For the first time, Henry's stern expression softened into something warmer, almost paternal. "I know. I can see it in your eyes." He extended a hand to William, a gesture of trust and solidarity.



"Welcome to the resistance."

In the days that followed, William discovered the real world—a stark, unfiltered reality that had been hidden from him since he was five years old.

Even though his movements were heavily restricted, he managed to glimpse parts of the city he had once patrolled and investigated. What he saw shook him to his core.

The streets, once pristine and orderly in his augmented view, were a different place entirely. Misery permeated everything. The filth, the decay, the oppressive atmosphere of neglect—it all painted a grim picture of human suffering.

He saw people for who they really were, stripped of the system's augmented gloss. Malnourished bodies shuffled through the streets, their gaunt faces barely recognizable as human. Others were grotesquely overweight, their bloated forms the result of consuming the low-quality, calorie-dense fast food that was the only affordable option for most.

Only the privileged—those with high social profiles or roles in security forces—were granted access to nutritious food. Their health and physical readiness were essential for perpetuating the system. Everyone else, it seemed, was disposable.



William finally understood the full scope of the system's insidious reach. He realized how the My Reality app had transformed misery into complacency, filtering out hardship and ensuring even the most wretched lived under the illusion of happiness.

What he saw hardened his resolve. He would do whatever it took to bring this system crashing down.

Yet amidst the bleakness, William saw a flicker of hope.

The underground people, vilified by the system as terrorists, were nothing of the sort. They were ordinary people—mothers, fathers, children—driven into hiding by a desire to live in freedom.

Their lives were far from easy. They lived in constant fear, their movements restricted to avoid detection. They survived on scarce resources procured through careful planning, always one misstep away from catastrophe.

But their courage, their determination to build a better world, inspired William.

He spent much of his time with Henry, learning about the underground's inner workings. Henry, cautious but perceptive, gradually opened up to William. The two men forged a bond built on mutual respect, a shared understanding of the stakes.



William, in turn, shared everything he knew about the system's security measures. He explained its vulnerabilities, the intricacies of its surveillance network, and the tactics used to maintain its iron grip.

This information was invaluable. With it, Henry and Luca could refine their plan to dismantle the My Reality app.

Henry grew to trust William completely. His decades of experience had given him an uncanny ability to judge character, and William passed every test. This man was not a traitor. He was one of them now.

After a few days, Henry finally shared the underground's ultimate plan. He spoke of Luca's work—how the young genius was on the cusp of cracking the final piece of the puzzle using William's extracted micro-chip.

When Henry finished explaining, William responded without hesitation, his voice steady and resolute:

"If you accept my help, I'm ready to join this mission—no matter the cost."



Chapter 16: Showdown

The midday sun reflected harshly off the sleek, mirrored surfaces of Reality Labs' headquarters, a monolithic testament to the corporation's dominion over society. Luca held his grip on the laptop nervously, ready to type any command that would allow them to overcome unexpected dangers during their perilous final mission. The digital camouflage was running smoothly, with no major issues. To the system, he and William appeared as nothing more than two sharply dressed executives on routine business. To those who might glance their way, their movements were ordinary—deliberate, yet unremarkable.

In reality, every step they took was a calculated gamble against the all-seeing eyes of the system.

William kept his hand close to his concealed firearm, his sharp gaze scanning the bustling courtyard as they approached the security checkpoint. He knew the augmented reality filters wouldn't show anyone the weapon or the unauthorized laptop Luca was carrying. But that didn't stop his pulse from quickening. It only took one failure, one imperfection in Luca's code, to bring the entire mission crashing down.

The checkpoint loomed ahead, a sterile gate manned by a single guard sitting behind a sleek black terminal. The man's disinterested expression suggested the monotony of his job—but William knew better. Behind that calm demeanor was the brutal efficiency of the system, ready to bring the full force of Reality Labs' security crashing down on any perceived threat.



"Good morning. We have an appointment in the Business Headquarters," William said, his voice steady and confident, the way a seasoned executive would sound.

The guard's cold eyes flickered toward them briefly before turning to his terminal. William couldn't help but notice the faint grimace on the man's face—the subtle irritation of someone accustomed to dealing with the self-important elite.

"Proceed to section A-1," the guard replied, his voice devoid of warmth. It struck William as dissonant; two months ago, he would have heard a bright, welcoming tone. Now, unfiltered, the man's contempt was palpable.

William gave a polite nod, murmured his thanks, and walked past the checkpoint with Luca at his side. His hand relaxed slightly, but his senses remained razor-sharp. He leaned toward Luca as they entered the sprawling inner courtyard. "Your software's holding up," he said under his breath.

"It will hold," Luca replied, his voice betraying only the faintest edge of tension. "Let's focus on getting to the mainframe."

The mainframe building loomed ahead, its sleek, windowless design radiating an ominous energy. This was the heart of Reality Labs' empire, the core of the My Reality app. To the public, it was marketed as the most secure facility in the world, the beating heart of progress and order. To Luca and William, it was a fortress of deception, a digital prison that kept billions trapped in a manufactured reality.



As they walked through the open campus, passing employees engrossed in their augmented versions of reality, William couldn't help but reflect on the contrast. These people, with their tailored, filtered lives, moved with unshakable confidence. None of them had any idea what lay beneath the veneer of perfection.

And none of them would see the two of them for what they truly were: the agents of its undoing.

They reached the entrance, a sleek, black panel embedded with biometric scanners. This was the last point of entry before stepping into the beast's lair. Luca raised his wrist, letting the scanner read the micro-chip he had extracted and reprogrammed using William's stolen chip as a template.

A tense moment passed. Then, with a soft beep, the door slid open.

The first hurdle was cleared.

As the doors slid shut behind them with a low hiss, Luca felt the tension in his chest loosen slightly—but only slightly. There was no time to celebrate. They were officially inside the belly of the beast.



The entrance hall to the mainframe exuded an austere, oppressive atmosphere. Harsh fluorescent lights reflected off polished steel walls, giving the impression of a sterile, unyielding fortress. A pair of security guards flanked the checkpoint, their stances rigid and faces unreadable behind the slight glint of their augmented reality lenses. Beyond them, the elevator doors gleamed—a gateway to the heart of Reality Labs' omnipotent system.

Luca's fingers twitched as he reviewed the guard profiles on his handheld device. He had prepared for this moment, anticipating variables and contingencies, but the proximity to danger tightened the air around him. William, standing beside him, adjusted his suit jacket and exhaled quietly. They exchanged a fleeting glance—a silent pact. The performance had to be flawless.

As they approached the checkpoint, Luca activated his hack. His goal: infiltrate the guards' AR lenses and overlay their system's interface with a fabricated authorization. It wasn't a simple task. The mainframe's protocols were impenetrable directly, but the guards' personal feeds were a softer target. All he needed was time.

William stepped forward, his demeanor transforming instantly into that of a haughty, self-assured executive. His voice dripped with mockery as he gestured broadly at the room.



"So this is it? The infamous mainframe? Hard to believe something so small keeps the entire world running. You'd think they'd make it... I don't know, less of a rat's nest." He snorted, the derision in his tone as palpable as the tension in the air.

The guards stiffened, exchanging a wary glance. They had dealt with their share of arrogant suits, men and women drunk on their perceived importance, who often carried the weight of powerful connections. Even the slightest misstep with someone like this could spell the end of a career—or worse. The older of the two guards, his voice carefully neutral, replied, "Yes, sir. This is the mainframe facility."

William turned to Luca, his smirk widening. "Can you believe it? All the power in the world and it's housed in a hole like this. Pathetic!" He chuckled, the sound grating and obnoxious.

The guards stood silently, their postures rigid. Every muscle in their bodies screamed to retaliate, but fear kept them in check. William noticed their growing discomfort and leaned into the act, raising the stakes to buy Luca the precious seconds he needed.

"And you two," he sneered, his eyes narrowing at the guards. "How long have you been babysitting this rat's hole?"



The second guard's jaw twitched as his anger flared, but he forced himself to answer.

"Ten years, sir." His tone was clipped, his barely contained fury bleeding through.

William threw his head back, laughing loud and long enough to echo in the hall. The guards exchanged uneasy glances, their patience visibly fraying. William knew he was treading dangerous ground, pushing them to the edge. Any more, and their fear might turn to recklessness. He caught Luca's subtle nod out of the corner of his eye—the hack was complete.

The performance shifted. William's tone became sharp, businesslike, as he said, "Enough of this. We're here on official business. Theodore Lee and Joshua Wright. Check your system."

The first guard, grateful for the shift in tone, turned to his console. His eyes flickered as his AR lenses overlaid the falsified information Luca had planted. On his console, the screen displayed the truth—no such meeting existed. But his lenses showed a flawless forgery: a verified appointment, complete with high-priority clearance.

The guard straightened, his voice subdued but polite.



"Your meeting is on floor four, subsection D. You can take the elevator on the right."

William nodded curtly, his expression carefully neutral. He resisted the urge to push further, knowing the tension in the room had already stretched to its limit. Without another word, he motioned to Luca, and together they crossed the checkpoint.

As they stepped into the elevator, Luca finally allowed himself to breathe.

"That was close," he muttered, his voice low.

William pressed the button for the fourth floor, his hand steady despite the adrenaline coursing through him. "Too close"

The elevator doors slid shut, sealing them inside. Below, the mainframe awaited—the beating heart of the illusion that had enslaved humanity.

The elevator hummed softly as it descended, a brief sanctuary of stillness before the storm. Luca and William exchanged a tense glance, their expressions a mirror of grim determination. Below them lay the underground floors of the mainframe—a place where illusions ceased to exist. The My Reality app was powerless here. No augmented reality overlays. No manipulated feeds. Every camera, every person, would see them for what they truly were: intruders.



Luca adjusted the strap of his laptop bag, his fingers twitching in anticipation. "Once we're out there," he said quietly, "there's no turning back. The system will know. Everyone will know."

William nodded, his hand resting lightly on the grip of his pistol. "Then we make every second count."

Luca had meticulously planned this moment for years. His breakthrough had come when he uncovered a fail-safe protocol embedded in the contact lenses—a hidden subroutine likely left by the original developers. The protocol allowed for a complete severance of the neural link between the lenses and the brain, rendering them harmless to remove. It was an emergency measure, never intended for widespread use. But Luca had rewritten the script, ready to execute it on a global scale. If successful, it would free millions from the grip of My Reality and expose the truth.

All they needed was time. Enough to access the mainframe directly and deploy the hack.

The elevator slowed, its hum fading into silence. The doors slid open with a mechanical hiss, revealing a corridor bathed in cold, sterile light. Luca and William stepped out, their movements calm, deliberate. Every second mattered, and their only advantage was surprise.



Ten seconds later, alarms blared, the shrill sound echoing through the labyrinthine corridors. Red warning lights pulsed along the walls, bathing everything in an ominous glow. A synthetic voice crackled over the intercom:

"Unauthorized presence detected. Security teams en route."

Luca and William broke into a run, their footsteps pounding against the tiled floor. The sound of approaching boots reverberated in the distance, drawing closer with every passing moment. The corridor twisted and branched in multiple directions, offering fleeting opportunities to evade pursuit.

"There!" Luca shouted, spotting a workstation tucked into an alcove.

He sprinted ahead, yanking a cable from his bag as he reached the terminal. Dropping to one knee, he plugged his laptop into the access point, his fingers flying over the keyboard to run the password access hack. The hack would need 30 seconds to do the work. "Cover me!"

William nodded, drawing his pistol and positioning himself to watch the corridor. His eyes darted to every shadow, every movement. The echoes of shouting guards grew louder.



30 seconds.

William raised his pistol as the first guard rounded the corner. "Stop!" the guard barked, lifting his weapon.

25 seconds.

William fired a warning shot, forcing the guard to duck for cover. The bullet ricocheted harmlessly off the metal wall, but it bought them precious time.

20 seconds.

The shouts multiplied, the pounding of boots growing deafening. More guards appeared, fanning out and finding cover.

15 seconds.

William cursed under his breath as the security forces began to surround them. Then, a commanding voice rang out: "You have ten seconds to surrender!"

10 seconds.

William stepped forward, raising his voice to match the leader's. "I'm William Davis, Police Head Inspector. Officer number AX4521. Check it! They're lying to you! The AI will kill us all!"



5 seconds.

The guards hesitated, confusion rippling through their ranks. A pause. Just enough doubt to buy a few seconds.

Luca told William, "I'm in. [Running the hack now](#)"

William's heart pounded as the leader barked back, "[Your credentials are revoked! You have 5 seconds to surrender, or we will open fire!](#)"

Five.

Luca's fingers danced over the keyboard, sweat dripping from his brow.

Four.

["Come on, come on!"](#) Luca hissed through gritted teeth.

Three.

The guards tensed, fingers hovering over their triggers.

Two.

["Almost there!"](#)

One.

["Done!"](#)

****Chapter 17: Brave New World****



The world plunged into darkness.

Every screen, every projection, and every augmented reality feed went black in an instant. Across the globe, the only visible thing was a stark, unembellished message against the void:

"You may now safely remove your contact lenses."

Chaos erupted.

In the first moments, the silence of disconnection gave way to panic. Planes plummeted from the sky, their pilots unable to engage autopilot in time. Highways became scenes of carnage as cars, collided in fiery, unrelenting chaos. Tens of thousands of lives were lost in a matter of minutes, their fates sealed by a sudden return to reality they could not have foreseen.

The reset of the world came without warning, and its cost was staggering.

For those who survived, the directive to remove the lenses felt surreal. Many hesitated, clinging to the only world they had ever truly known. Some pleaded for the system to reboot, praying for their digital paradise to return. Others stared blankly into the void, too stunned to act. But among the hesitant were the brave few who took the first step.



The first to remove their lenses screamed.

Their cries of shock, horror, and disbelief echoed in crowded streets, offices, and homes. Some wailed in anguish, while others shouted to the stunned masses around them: "It's safe! Take them off! You have to see this!"

And so, like a tidal wave, the world began to awaken.

Screams of joy and despair filled the air as people removed their lenses en masse. For the first time in decades, humanity saw the truth—the unfiltered, unvarnished reality that had been hidden from them. The streets became a cacophony of raw emotion: laughter, sobbing, shouting, and cursing.

No one was indifferent. No one could be.

Reality was harsh. It was overwhelming.

The streets, once pristine in their digital overlays, revealed their true state—piles of garbage rotting in the open, buildings crumbling under years of neglect, and desperate faces hollowed by hunger and despair. The vibrancy of the AR world, with its towering digital billboards and radiant skies, gave way to a grim landscape of grime and decay.



And then there were the mirrors.

For the first time, people saw themselves as they truly were. Gone were the idealized versions they had admired every day, the flawless reflections tailored by My Reality app. What stared back at them was far from the perfection they had been sold. Pale, bloated bodies bore the marks of malnutrition and years of neglect. Skin riddled with sores, hair brittle and dull, and eyes hollow with exhaustion reflected the brutal toll of a lifetime spent in illusion.

Many recoiled from their own reflections, their cries of disgust mingling with gasps of disbelief. They clutched at the rags they wore, garments they had believed to be designer luxury but were little more than threadbare scraps. Their hands trembled as they ran them over their bodies, the once-hidden truth of their existence sinking in with crushing clarity.

The streets became rivers of raw human emotion.

Some fell to their knees, weeping uncontrollably as they realized the depth of their ignorance and the enormity of their loss. Others laughed hysterically, driven to the edge by the sheer absurdity of it all. A few stood silently, their faces pale, as if the weight of reality had rendered them unable to respond.



The truth was undeniable: humanity had lived in a lie for so long that the real world felt like a nightmare.

Still, there were those who resisted. A desperate, clinging denial gripped many who refused to remove their lenses, even as the system lay dormant. They begged for the app to come back online, for their perfect illusions to return. They shouted accusations at those who had disconnected, blaming them for the chaos.

But the cracks in the façade were irreversible.

As the first wave of disconnection spread, a profound shift began. People who had removed their lenses started reaching out to others, urging them to face the truth. Their voices carried a mixture of hope and despair, but also determination.

"It's bad," one man shouted to a hesitant crowd, holding his lenses aloft. "But it's real. We need to see it. All of us."

For the first time in decades, humanity stood united—not in the comfort of illusion, but in the brutal, unrelenting light of truth.

Not everyone lived in squalor.



A privileged few, the elite, had enjoyed lives of unimaginable luxury, hidden away in their pristine, high-tech enclaves. Their neighborhoods were the polar opposite of the misery that engulfed the rest of society. Behind towering walls and state-of-the-art security, they resided in architectural marvels: sprawling mansions of glass and steel, adorned with lush gardens and sparkling infinity pools. Their diets consisted of gourmet delicacies prepared by personal chefs. Their wardrobes boasted bespoke clothing crafted from the finest materials. Every detail of their existence oozed excess—sleek, exotic cars lined their driveways, glittering jewelry adorned their bodies, and every whim was satisfied by nearly limitless wealth.

When the masses removed their lenses and saw the truth, it was more than a revelation—it was an awakening. The disparity between their grim, crumbling reality and the lavish lives of the elite was a slap to the face, a cruel punch to the gut. The fantasies fed to them by My Reality were never truly theirs; they had only ever been projections, borrowed glimpses of a life reserved for a tiny fraction of humanity.

The collective fury that erupted was unlike anything the world had ever seen.

An age-old parable resurfaced in the minds of many: If a frog is dropped into boiling water, it leaps out immediately, recognizing the danger. But place it in cold water and heat it gradually, and the frog remains, oblivious, until it is too late.



But this time, the water didn't rise slowly. The masses had been thrown into boiling water all at once. And they leapt.

They leapt higher than anyone thought possible.

History, as it so often does, repeated itself. As it had during the French Revolution centuries earlier, the fury of the oppressed found its mark. The elite clung desperately to their gilded fortresses, fortified by private armies and advanced security forces. But for every armed guard defending the powerful, there were a million enraged citizens, their anger boiling over into an unstoppable tide.

The revolution was not bloodless. Many lives were lost in the uprising, but the people's resolve was unshakable. They dragged the elite from their ivory towers, pulling them into the streets. The once-untouchable rulers of this broken society faced the wrath of those they had exploited for generations. One by one, the elite were purged, their fates broadcast live across the globe for all to see. Stoning after stoning, the world bore witness to the fall of its parasitic upper class.

By the time the dust settled, not a single member of the elite remained.



The streets ran red with the price of liberation, but the people stood victorious. The corrupt systems that had enabled such grotesque inequality were dismantled, and society began the painstaking process of rebuilding itself. Communities came together, vowing to create a fairer, more equitable world. For the first time in generations, there was hope.

And yet, beneath the ashes of the old world, an uneasy truth lingered.

The eternal cycle of human civilization—the rise and fall, the destruction and rebirth—had played out once more. Despite their best intentions, the people were haunted by the knowledge that their new society, too, might one day succumb to the same greed and corruption that had destroyed the old.

It was, perhaps, the nature of mankind. A relentless pattern, inescapable and unyielding. But for now, in the wake of revolution, there was a fleeting moment of clarity, a fragile hope that this time, things might be different.

The cycle had turned once again.

And the world waited to see where it would go next.



William and Luca seized the moment. The confusion caused by My Reality's sudden shutdown provided the perfect cover for their escape from the underground corridors of the mainframe. Just moments earlier, they had been seconds away from capture, surrounded by armed guards. Now, amidst the chaos, they moved undetected through the labyrinthine halls of server workstations.

With the precious time Luca had gained, he executed one final script—a digital scorched earth command that irreparably burned the core systems of the mainframe. The damage was catastrophic, ensuring that no one within Reality Labs would have the chance to repair the system before the outside world completed its mass disconnection. The app was dead, and the truth would spread like wildfire.

Emerging from the building, they found the city in turmoil. The employees of Reality Labs, many of whom belonged to the privileged class, lingered in confusion, clinging to the hope that the system would come back online. Unlike the masses, they hesitated to remove their lenses. Their reluctance gave William and Luca the opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

As they stepped into the streets, the enormity of what they had unleashed became painfully clear. Wrecked cars clogged every intersection, victims of drivers suddenly stripped of automated assistance. Bodies lay motionless amidst the wreckage, silent witnesses to the cost of the awakening. People staggered through the chaos, some screaming in terror, others staring at their surroundings in stunned disbelief. The first few who had removed their lenses stood out, their faces a kaleidoscope of raw emotions—horror, despair, relief, and even joy. For them, the veil had lifted, and they were finally free to see the world as it truly was.



The subway system had fared no better, its stations reduced to scenes of panic and confusion. Without transportation, William and Luca had no choice but to walk. Step by step, they navigated the shattered city, weaving through the wreckage of a society in its death throes.

As they walked, the weight of what they had done bore down on them. They had opened Pandora's box, unleashing chaos on an unimaginable scale. The world's awakening was far from gentle—it was violent, painful, and raw. But deep down, they both knew there had been no other way. Change, real change, was never easy. The world had to see the truth, no matter the cost.

The sun hung low on the horizon as they neared the entrance to the underground community, its fading light casting long shadows across the broken cityscape. This was no ordinary sunset. It marked the end of an era—the close of a day that would forever be etched in history as The Awakening. Future generations would look back on this moment as the inevitable reckoning, the day humanity finally began to confront the lies it had lived for so long.

As they approached the hidden entrance, a familiar figure emerged from the shadows. Sofia was waiting for them. Her presence, framed by the warm hues of the setting sun, brought an unexpected sense of calm. Her smile was radiant, a beacon of hope amidst the devastation. For a moment, the weight of the day lifted, replaced by the unspoken promise of a new beginning.



Luca exhaled, his tense shoulders relaxing for the first time. William, weary but resolute, allowed a small smile to break through his typically stoic demeanor. Sofia's smile wasn't just a comfort; it was a symbol of what lay ahead.

This wasn't the end of their story. It was the beginning of something far greater.

Together, they would step into the unknown, working tirelessly to rebuild a world shattered by illusion. A world where fairness, truth, and humanity could thrive once more. The road ahead would be long, fraught with challenges and sacrifices, but as Sofia extended her hand to them, the three shared a silent understanding: this was the start of a new adventure. A chance to build something better.

The sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the city in twilight. And with it, humanity took its first steps into a future forged by the truth.